

Hospitality in the Prison Writings of Kim Dae-Jung

Dr. Arthur Sutherland

It is not difficult to understand why prisoners write letters. They write because it is often the only means they have to communicate with others. Visits are rare and frustrated by delays and sudden changes in administrative policy. Prisoners write because prisons tend to be in isolated parts of a country and because visiting someone in prison is treated by society as a form of shame. Prisoners write to relieve the tedium of incarceration and they write to justify their actions or plead their cause.

For these reasons it is not surprising that early Christian prisoners wrote letters as well. What is more interesting however is the way in which they joined the practice of letter writing with the theological virtue of hospitality. The letters themselves are acts of hospitality by which the author extended kindness and welcome. Second, the letters ask the recipient to extend hospitality to the writer in prospect of a coming visit after his release or to another person on his behalf, particularly those who had suffered immediately or indirectly because of his imprisonment. Third, the letters are hortatory and commend the practice of hospitality toward strangers and neighbors.

The tradition of letters by Christian prisoners continued after the close of the New Testament era. Due to the rise of religious tolerance, the list is more heavily weighted toward the patristic and medieval periods but the modern era does have a number of outstanding representatives including Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Kim Dae Jung. Kim was imprisoned during the 1980's because of his attempts to strengthen democracy in South Korea. During this period, Kim, a Roman Catholic, wrote a series of letters to his family that raise three critical concerns when thinking about hospitality today: boundaries, gift exchange, and invisibility. (Kim, 1987) While the first two items are important, from the viewpoint of theology, the last is the more critical.

BOUNDARIES

So vital was writing to Kim that he took several hours to write one letter. He used his letters to greet and to visit with those who can not come to visit him. In a moving passage Kim summons up a powerful image when he says of his singular monthly letter:

The letter goes home in my place, passing through the front gate, walking down the steps, entering the porch, and finally going into the living room to sit with the whole family (Kim, 1987, p. 53).

It is just at this point that an interesting factor enters. Kim's letters are addressed to his wife and sons. The standard thought is that hospitality is a gift offered to strangers, friends, and neighbors. So, can hospitality be shown to members of one's own family? Perhaps the problem is not as difficult if the recipient is a distant aunt or second cousin. But it seems unlikely that making a wife or child at ease fits into the same category as easing the needs of strangers. According to this account, Kim's letters to his wife and children are expressions of love, even agape love, but they do not meet the standard test of hospitality. This objection falls away when we consider the role of boundaries in the creation of hospitality. When Kim writes his sons Hong-il, Hong-up, and Hong-gul he addresses them by name. However, when he writes to his wife or to his daughter-in-law he does not address them directly. When addressing his wife he uses the expression «to my beloved wife» or «to you with respect and love.» When addressing his daughter-in-law, he speaks to her as «Jee-young's mother.» (Kim, 1987, p. 13). This manner of indirect speech is typically Asian and is considered to be more respectful and not less. Here we have a clear example of how culture may determine how one behaves in even the most private of affairs. Korean culture values a social modesty that is lacking in our own.

Moreover, it suggests that the basic requirement for showing and receiving hospitality is a notion of limitations and borders. Kim's letters are hospitable because they do not eliminate boundaries but because they stay within them. Typically, we speak of hospitality as useful in breaking down boundaries. We speak as if hospitality only occurs when we are successful in penetrating an atmosphere of mistrust, suspicion, and foreignness. But rather than only understanding hospitality as overcoming boundaries couldn't we also understand hospitality as respecting boundaries? Our society is increasingly bent toward assumed acquaintance. Kim's letters point out how far the post-modern West has severed itself from the practice of civility and respectful distance. Put another way, it raises the question of if hospitality can thrive or have any meaning in an age of increasing and thoughtless familiarity. Kim's letters respect the distance appropriate for family members in Korean culture and this allows hospitality to occur between giver and receiver.

GIFT EXCHANGE

It is typical of Kim to ask others to do what he can not do: he asks others to comfort those outside of prison suffering from either bad health or persecution. (Kim, 1987, p. 67) He quite often closes a letter by saying,

Do not forget about those who are suffering on our account, and remember to console and encourage them, if only spiritually. I hope you will do this on my behalf. (Kim, 1987, p. 16)

Other than this, Kim asks for surprisingly little for himself. (Kim, 1987, p. 86) Strikingly, he does ask, repeatedly, for reading material. The list is a substantial one, heavy in literature, religion, history, and the social sciences. It includes everything from Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*, to Solzhenitzyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*, to *The Debates and Decrees of the Second Vatican Council*. His reading in Galbraith,

Toynbee, and others suggests that he was interested in understanding the relationship between liberal democracy and economic development. It shows a person trying to grasp the fundamental sources of and solutions to the world's problems.

But the key item to understand is that Kim's reading was not just to satisfy his own intellectual needs. He sees his reading as something to be shared. He believes in books that are worth talking about. To him it was not a matter of punching through a text but the exercise of a relationship between father and son (Kim, 1987, p. 49)

How might this challenge our notion of hospitality? It can do so by showing that hospitality is not only the sharing of material goods or providing comfort but that it also includes making another aware and comfortable with the complexities of intellectual rigor. By sharing the reading list Kim is inviting his children into his «home» and offering them the chance to see that ideas are liberating. Ideas, in the form of shared reading, provide nurture and sustenance in a way that bed and board do not.

INVISIBILITY

Letters from early Christian prisoners had a hortatory function: they encouraged the practice of hospitality. Kim letters to his son Hong-gul, who is preparing to decide his major in college, and to his daughter-in-law, who is struggling to raise her family while her husband is under fire, follow this ancient pattern.

Hong-gul appears to share the typical aspirations and desires of any teenager. Automobiles, the martial arts, and athletics fascinate him. Kim does not downplay these interests but commends his son's tenacity. However, Kim also adds the following admonition:

You do of course have shortcomings. One is a seeming lack of concern for neighbors, but I know that if you patiently cultivate the strengths I have mentioned you are sure to find happiness and success. I hope that you proceed toward the goals in your life with humility before God and neighbors and with a mental attitude that remains positive. (Kim, 1987, p. 9)

This surpasses mere fatherly advice: Kim is concerned with the formation of character, a character that overcomes selfish desires. Developing the correct character requires a theology that is directed to the challenges and issues that confront Christians right now. Thus, he says to his daughter-in-law:

I believe our lives will be most meaningful if we spend them by participating with Him in the task whose aim is to bring about the days when God's will is done in this world as in heaven. For this end, as children of God, we must dedicate ourselves to the twofold purpose of individual and social salvation; that is we must help our neighbors and devote ourselves to the betterment of society. We must synchronize and harmonize these two enterprises just like the two wheels of an ox-cart. (Kim, 1987, p. 21)

Kim is keenly aware that one critical problem in extending hospitality to strangers or neighbors is that we don't see them. They are around us all the time but remain invisible to us. To counter this invisibility Kim

urges that his son and daughter-in-law take up practical exercises. For example, he counsels that every occasion offers an opportunity for prayer. While riding a bus, they should pray for the safety of fellow passengers. When crossing a street, they should pray for those at the intersection. He believes in transforming the ordinary whether it is working at a restaurant or going on a date (Kim, 1987, p. 27).

Kim's effort here is to make the neighbor visible. Invisibility is perhaps the major problem in urban areas. Because we encounter dozens or perhaps hundreds of people each day everyone becomes a stranger to us. What Kim rightly sees is that the same urbanization that brings more and more people closer to us threatens our sense of belonging to a community. Once others surround us we may no longer see ourselves as with others. Kim feels this has to be overcome. His recommendations are the first attempt at seeing what we really see all the time. He says in one letter, «It would be false to say one can love an invisible God when one cannot even love one's neighbors, God's children, who are, after all, quite visible.» (Kim, 1987, p. 47)

Kim makes the neighbor visible by speaking of love. He writes, for example, of the two kinds of love - love of oneself and love of God and one's neighbors:

One is selfish, isolating, and demeaning, while the other, the love of the Creator above all things in the universe and the genuine love of one's neighbors, leads to happiness and eternal life (Kim, 1987, p. 6).

What Kim has in mind is a love of self that has no regard for others. It is this type of love that makes the neighbor invisible to us.

The anchor of Kim's theology of love, of making the neighbor visible, is the resurrection. Kim wants to see Christ as he was visible before his death and as he was visible after his resurrection. He writes, «a genuine affirmation of the Christian faith depends on whether or not one accepts the resurrection of Jesus as historically valid. I am confiding this to you as my religious confession from the bottom of my heart.» (Kim, 1987, p. 18) According to Kim, it is through the resurrection that God gives us hope and demonstrates God's love. He argues,

Love for our neighbors is no different. Our neighbors are all God's children, whether they are Christians or not. It is only natural that we love those who are our brothers before God. To love especially those of our neighbors who need our care and encouragement is one of the most important of God's commandments. And when we consider how much loving care we receive from others, in food shelter, clothing, education, health, and other ways, loving them is only a fitting return for all the love they have given us. (Kim, 1987, p. 6)

At another point Kim writes of the resurrection:

We should pay more attention, however, to a fact made clear in the Bible: He was executed as a political prisoner by the Jewish ruling class and the Roman Empire for standing up for the rights of the oppressed and the poor. His resurrection, therefore, should not be interpreted simply as hope for eternal life in heaven. It should be seen as God's approval and confirmation of Christ's actions

on earth, that is as a sign of God's approval for Jesus' struggle and advocacy of justice and peace in this world, which should be made unconditionally accessible to the oppressed and the poor.
(Kim, 1987, p. 107)

Taken together these passages illuminate the centerpiece of Kim's theology of hospitality: hospitality is the visible manifestation of God's invisible grace made known through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Thus, while boundaries and gift exchange may be reasonably understood because they are derived from a stance within culture, in Kim's understanding the transformation of the stranger from invisible to visible can not be done without a commitment to the God that transforms culture.

CONCLUSION

The ancient Christian practice of hospitality has come down to us not only in a number of forms but also with a number of functions. By a close study of the writings of Christian prisoners we can begin to understand the ways in which new understanding of hospitality might break open for us. Hospitality needs social borders; it has trouble thriving in an arena awash with cheap familiarity. Hospitality wants to be understood not just as the providing of material comfort but the exchange of intellectual comfort as well. Christian hospitality, unlike its secular cousin, makes the invisible stranger or neighbor visible by believing in the visible bodily resurrection of Christ.

Kim Dae Jung is not a classically trained theologian. Unlike other modern Christian prisoners like Bonhoeffer and King, his letters show him to be a sort of theological journeyman. However, his writings make clear that he has captured the essential qualities of Christian witness and stands in the best tradition of being held captive for Christ.

REFERENCES

Kim, D -J. (1987). *Prison Writings* (Choi Sung-il and David R. McCann, Trans.). Berkeley: University of California Press.

Address correspondence to:

Arthur Sutherland
Theology Department
Loyola College in Maryland
4501 North Charles Street
Baltimore, MD 21210
e-mail: asutherland@loyola.edu

[Back to current electronic table of contents](#)