

SERMON for Pentecost 12 - September 1st, 2019.

Readings: Proverbs 25: 6-7; Psalm 112; Hebrews 13: 1-8, 15-16; Luke 14: 1, 7-14.

Have you ever participated in one of those games where you are asked, if you could sit down to table with three people, living or dead, real or fictitious, who would it be?

Inevitably amongst many in Christian circles, you might find Jesus as one of the hypothetical guests named. But, much as I love the Lord, I'm not sure if I would be brave enough to invite him to sit with me! Much as he seems to love being offered hospitality, and readily accepts when he is invited, he also seems very quick to use that invitation as a way of teaching a lesson in good behaviour, and usually the more elite the company, the more pointed and critical the lesson!

Today's Gospel is a fine example of this. Our story takes place on another Sabbath, and Jesus has been invited to the home of "an important Pharisee". There is a section which we miss out, which includes the healing of a man with dropsy, which is quite reminiscent of last week's reading, except this time no one is prepared to speak out against Jesus' actions.

So while the guests refuse to engage with 'the elephant in the room' – Jesus' continual healing on the Sabbath – Jesus rather cynically watches the guests, jockeying for position around the table for the meal.

As I read and ponder this reading, one word springs to mind – 'humility' – something we are all called to.

But like other words such as 'love', 'humility' is a word which has been abused and misused and is totally misunderstood.

Humility, being humble, is not about being a doormat, walked on, taken advantage of by all and sundry. True humility is about knowing that all you are and all you have has been given to you by God.

The Principles of the Third Order of the Society of St Francis describes humility:

We always keep before us the example of Christ, who emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, and who on the last night of his life, humbly washed his disciples' feet. We likewise seek to serve one another with humility.

Humility confesses that we have nothing that we have not received and admits the fact of our insufficiency and our dependence upon God. It is the basis of all Christian virtues It is the first condition of a joyful life within any community.

.... We are ready to accept the lowest place when asked, and to volunteer to take it. Nevertheless, when asked to undertake work of which we feel unworthy or incapable, we do not shrink from it on the grounds of humility, but confidently attempt it through the power that is made perfect in weakness. [1]

Humility sets us free, rather than stifles who or what we are. Being humble means we aren't caught up with our own importance, hampered by what we believe is beneath us or beyond us. Being humble, having humility, allows us to trust in God, believe that what comes our way is a God given opportunity to be, to serve, to learn, to share, who we are before God with another – "confidently" being, serving, sharing "through the power that is made perfect in weakness".

So, where do you place yourself at a table?!

Today's reading from Hebrews, is another challenge if read with the back-drop today's social paranoia, the fear whipped up by international terrorism, the fear and distrust of those who are ethnically or religiously "different".

As in so many other New Testament letters, this concluding chapter contains a number of admonitions to those the letter was addressed to. It sets out the high moral standards which are expected of them – and us – in their particular setting.

It is clear that for Christians then ... and now ... ethical behaviour is rooted in faith. Our relationship with Christ helps us to behave as we should toward one another.

Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. ... Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have; for he has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you." [2]

Because we believe in the unchangeable Christ – 'Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever' – we are encouraged to behave in certain disciplined ways that others may not share. As with what I said about humility, we do this confidently, with the help of God and following the example of those who shared this faith with us. An email friend suggests that such a life may involve sacrifice, but we may think of such sacrifice as an act of worship offered to God. [3]

Sacrifice, but also freedom.

Hospitality is another underlying theme in today's readings, and while the readings deal with the literal – the being a guest and the etiquette of being a good host – these readings say more to me.

"We are called to show hospitality to the stranger in our midst. We are called to welcome those who are not like us to share in the feast. We are called to be humble and faithful. We are called to a message that makes us feel uncomfortable." [4]

Each Sunday, for some each day, we pray "Your kingdom come on earth as it is in Heaven", how conscious are we of what we are praying for? For most, the kingdom of God is a myth ... but it isn't, and it is our responsibility, that of all believers, to make it into a rock-solid reality.

At the heart of the church is hospitality. It is a core value for us. We seek to have a reputation as being an open and welcoming community. This is God's house and a place where all are welcome, no matter how much that challenges our sense of comfort.

We worship a God who is love, who has concern for the "little ones" of our society, who is all seeing, all knowing, from whom nothing or no one can hide. So, when we say 'All are welcome', do we mean it? The poor, the hungry, the sick and injured, the immigrant and the exile, the refugee?

We are called to be 'as Christ' to one another. And while I believe this with every fibre of my being, it still makes me feel very uncomfortable from time to time when the full implications become clear.

So, at our hypothetical dinner party, we have finally plucked up the courage to invite Jesus. How would we respond?

Would we be like this unnamed Pharisee and have a free for all for the seating arrangements and earn a rebuke to invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind?

Would we be like Simon the Pharisee who forgets the basics of hospitality, forgetting to wash the guests' feet or anoint them with oil?

Would we be like Martha, distracted by and resentful of many things?

Or Levi the tax collector who is so joyful that he repays all he has ripped off his community, leaves his job and follows Christ?

This God, who we are here today to worship, calls us into ever challenging responses in our lives, whether or not we choose to respond. But, above all, we are called to love.

The Lord is with us. Amen.

Revd Sally Buckley tssf
1 September, 2019.

REFERENCES:

1. The Principles of the Third Order of the Society of St Francis – The First Note – Humility.
2. Hebrews 13: 1-5
3. From John Shearman's *Scripture Introductions* as shared on *midrash*.
4. Comments by Art Hebbeler in a sermon posted on *midrash* in 2007.