

## Sunday 28 August 2016 Trinity 14

### Table Talk

As we read the gospels, it becomes clear that Jesus had few standards about whom he ate with. People noticed and were very ready to complain that he ate with sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes – all sorts of unsuitable people!

In today's gospel story, though, Jesus is at a proper dinner in proper company – he's having a Sabbath meal at the home of a leader of the Pharisees. Jesus takes the opportunity, however, to comment on the behaviour both of his fellow guests and of the host.

First he notices how everyone's moving their place cards around to sit closer to the head table, jockeying for position. "Don't shove yourself forward like that", he says – you only risk embarrassing yourself!

Most scholars think that Luke probably added this particular bit of worldly wisdom to catch the attention of the Gentiles who were his particular audience; but its punch-line is certainly a very common theme in Jesus' teaching:

"For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

The reading from Ecclesiasticus for today has much to say about humility as opposed to human pride.

"The Lord overthrows the thrones of rulers,  
and enthrones the lowly in their place.  
The Lord plucks up the roots of the nations,  
and plants the humble in their place."

Humility is central to the Christian life, yet is a constant struggle for all of us!

It's by no means only the Pharisees or the Gentiles, of course, who jockey for position. All the gospels report the disciples arguing among themselves as to who is more important; the mother of James and John even comes to Jesus and asks to have her sons sit at his right and left hand in the Kingdom. In Luke's recounting, the disciples are even arguing about "which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest" during the last supper!

Getting back to this slightly awkward dinner party – Jesus then turns his attention to the host, and perhaps not too graciously questions his guest list.

"When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbours, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you."

Jesus is not here condemning normal socialising among family and friends for we know that he himself enjoyed dinners at the home of his friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, and at Peter's home; and when he begins the Last Supper he tells his closest companions, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you". Eating with friends is one of the joys of life; a "companion" after all is someone with whom you break bread.

But fellowship is not meant to be merely transactional, in which we collect and repay social debts. And extending hospitality or kindness just to our friends is no special merit. As Jesus says in the Sermon on the Plain earlier in this gospel,

"If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same."

Instead, Jesus tells those gathered at this dinner party,

“When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind” -- people who would never expect to be invited, people who could never repay the hospitality – people, by the way, who could really use a good dinner.

In the Old Testament, God tells the Israelites over and over again, “You will keep my law, and I will be your God, and you will be my people,” Torah law very consistently commands care for those unable to care for themselves, especially those without power – the widow, the orphan, the stranger. The connection is clear and direct: “You shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God” In effect Jesus’ whole life and ministry asks, Why aren’t we doing this? The way of the world, under the Roman empire, assumes that you get ahead by working hard, cultivating the right connections, accumulating money, position and power.

Jesus offers a whole other vision. “Blessed are you poor,” he said, “for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.” This can be true, his life shows, not just in a dreamed-of future, but right now, in a community of true sharing.

The earliest Christians do seem to have practiced a radically communal lifestyle. Acts tells us that “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the good will of all the people.”

Scholar John Dominic Crossan suggests that this is how the early church managed to spread. Jesus’ claim – that God’s reign of justice and community was already breaking in, meant the early church showing just such a life style and this attracted others to join them.

Jesus went even further in his own activities and teaching. Besides the poor, he associated with all sorts of unsuitable people. He spoke at length to a Samaritan woman; he let a prostitute anoint his feet, he made himself ritually impure by touching lepers and even the dead.

And he suggests in his surprising advice to the host that a generous dinner would include not only the poor but also “the crippled, the lame, and the blind”

Just whom to include in the shared meal was an active issue for the first Christians. The book of Acts is full of their discussions about whether Jews and Gentiles could eat together. But both Peter and Paul came to realise and assert that “God shows no partiality”. That decision by the early church, of course, allows us – who are not Jews – to be here today!

Getting it right – acting like a community that mirrors the love of God – wasn’t much easier for the early Christians than it is for us. Most of the letters in the New Testament were written by Paul or other apostles to local churches that were losing heart or setting up artificial barriers or squabbling among themselves.

This morning’s epistle reading was probably written to a community of believers in or near Rome, fifty years or so after the death of Jesus. These Christians are getting discouraged as they wait for Jesus’ expected return. The writer exhorts this community to persevere in following Jesus’ example. “Let mutual love continue,” he tells them. “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”

The community they need to rebuild has at least two critical parts. The fellowship here translated as “mutual love” is philadelphia – love of brothers and sisters. The “hospitality to strangers” is philoxenia – love of outsiders. Both are essential to a Christian community.

Hospitality is a core value for Jesus and for his church. It is also, I am glad to believe, a core value for this church. Being truly inclusive and welcoming to everyone, despite colour, sexuality, disability, age, past sins, police record or even an ex-prisoner, (as our second reading encourages us), is why many of us want to be part of this community.

In the world Jesus envisioned – the world we in the church are supposed to represent – everyone is invited and everyone is welcome.

The function of our worship – indeed the function of the church – is to give some glimpse of the Kingdom or reign of God. We try to show in our life together what it would mean – what it does mean – if God is in charge in our lives. One of the things it means, it seems to me, is that we don't get to choose who we hang out with. God does the inviting. And fortunately God's imagination is much better than ours!

In the church – as the church – we become family, because we are all adopted by God.

Do you remember how Luke ends his gospel? After Easter, two disciples are walking away from Jerusalem toward Emmaus. Jesus joins them on the road, but they think he is a stranger. They have been discussing the scripture with this man and testifying to Jesus' life for some hours. But it is only when they themselves offer hospitality – when they themselves make the invitation and share the meal – that “their eyes were opened, and they recognised him” Jesus becomes real to us only as we ourselves live into the reality of his kingdom by offering hospitality to all who present themselves – as if to Christ himself. It is in sharing his meal that Jesus gets close to us – and how much closer, if he is in our midst at a 'Nave Altar', as we become the Body of Christ on earth, as we gather right here we are a part of Christ's body.

The theologian Alexander Schmemmann believes,

'The whole body concelebrates the Eucharist, makes it happen, and Christ consecrates the elements as the high priest, through the action of the Holy Spirit using the hands of the president, who stands at the head of the body. This is the unity of the church, seen as one body; Christ's body bringing friend and stranger together and witnessing to the world that Jesus Christ is King and Lord of the world.

True hospitality - true Christian living, a welcome to everyone.

Today's epistle ends,

“Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.”

Living as Christ's disciples includes not only “confessing his name” but also works of mercy and the sharing of fellowship – that is Christian community.

Amen.