

Sunday 28 August 2022
Holy Trinity – Holy Communion (8.00am)
Trinity 11

Proverbs 25: 6-7
Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16
Luke 14:1, 7-14

This morning we find ourselves right in the middle of Luke's Gospel. As I read this passage earlier in the week, my first reaction was that it felt a bit like a first century version of the TV program 'Big Brother'. Everything Jesus does and says is being critically watched, sifted and distorted.

Having already been a guest in the home of a Pharisee back in Chapter 7, we join Jesus once again in the home of a Pharisee who is attempting to trap Him into saying or doing something that could spark His arrest. Given that Jesus had not held back on denouncing the Pharisees on a number of previous occasions, it is only in realising the Pharisee's motive that we can see why Jesus is being invited back into his home.

So, this is no innocent invitation to dinner. It has been set up to try and trap Jesus and he knows that, all too well.

Do you ever think of Jesus as clever? Well, this isn't just clever. The way he handles this trap is so quick witted, even humorous. He's in somebody else's home, surrounded by hostile eyes. He makes no attempt to curry favour or play to the crowd. He goes straight on the offensive, re-focusing the spotlight on his watchers. They had expected to see a spectacle but instead they actually became the spectacle.

Jesus watches as the guests jostle for position and then he tells two stories about dinner parties. Both of these stories cut straight to the heart of what it is that the Pharisees and the other community leaders want to know about Jesus. They want to know who he is. They want to know how to rank him in their own hierarchy of values. They need to know how they can treat him and expect him to treat them. But Jesus simply won't play this game.

Over and over again in the Gospels we see people coming to Jesus with the same kind of questions about hierarchy and position and more especially about how this all affects them. In every instance Jesus refuses to answer in those terms. It's not that Jesus wants to replace one set of hierarchies with another, but more that he's trying to get people to start again with a completely different set of assumptions.

In the first of today's stories, there's only one measure and that's the reaction of the host. The guest has to remember that it's not his dinner party and, therefore, it's not for him to decide who sits where. That right belongs to the host who alone should decide the seating arrangements.

In the second story, the question is what will be the outcome of the dinner party? Is the point of it that it will generate a whole load of other invitations, brighten up your social life or even enhance your status? Or, might there be another point?

Any of the guests who were still under the impression that these stories were actually about dinner parties are quickly disillusioned. With this mention right at the end of the "resurrection of the righteous" it then becomes obvious that these parties are God's parties. This is about the Kingdom.

And then the stories get really quite worrying, because Jesus seems to be suggesting to his audience that they've got no idea at all of the criteria that God is using to send out his invitations.

No amount of working your way up the religious ladder is going to guarantee admission, and if you do get invited, you can expect to find yourself in some fairly strange company when you get there. But if, despite all that, you still want to be at the wedding banquet, what are you supposed to do? If God's criteria are so odd, how can we be sure of our invitation?

Well, the answer to that seems to be that, if that's the way you're asking the question, then the answer will always be problematic.

How can I make sure that everybody gets an invitation is probably a bit nearer the mark. And, underlying that, how can I live my life so that I would be genuinely pleased to see the local homeless beggar sitting at Jesus' right hand at the banquet? How can I learn that including everybody doesn't devalue my own invitation? The first step is to remember that we ourselves have done remarkably little to earn our own invitation, so why should we be resentful about God's grace to others?

When, way back in the year 1633, the famous priest and poet George Herbert wrote his poem on the theme of God as host, he reminded us that the banquet is about God's generosity, not our merit. Of course, there's no way of knowing now, but it's perfectly possible that Herbert had this very Gospel passage in mind when he wrote this poem. When invited to the feast, the guest in the poem hangs back aware of his limitations; how he has come to the party unprepared, ungrateful and unkind.

But Love, the host, is under no illusions about his guests. He knows what he's doing. It's a short poem so I'll read it in full...

Love bade me welcome. Yet my soul drew back
Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
From my first entrance in,

Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning
If I lacked anything.
'A guest,' I answered, 'worthy to be here.'
Love said, 'You shall be he.'
'I the unkind, ungrateful? Ah my dear,
I cannot look on thee.'
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
'Who made the eyes but I?'
'Truth Lord; but I have marred them; let my shame
Go where it doth deserve.'
'And know you not,' says Love, 'who bore the blame?'
'My dear, then I will serve.'
'You must sit down,' says Love, 'and taste my meat:'
So I did sit and eat.

Amen.