

Sunday 29 August 2010: Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity

Welcome guests of God

Readings: Hebrews 13.1-8, 15-16; Luke 14. 1, 7-14

Guest lists are always tricky. This summer I was reminded again of the experience of holding our wedding in a small village on the Croatian coast fourteen years ago, where my husband Loren's father comes from and where the family still have a home. Although it was a small affair with about 50 guests, the planning and preparation, the seating plan and logistics still managed to cause us problems. With a mother-in-law who worked as a lawyer for the Croatian parliament, it was hard work to steer her off inviting half of the then Croatian cabinet. In the end she made do with the flamboyant female Justice Minister as well as a well-known opera singer, and former girlfriend of Tito, who came in handy for singing an aria at the wedding and together the two of them led the traditional songs at the reception. There was certainly a sense of honour having been done, at least some of the 'right' people were invited, and the family and friends who we simply wanted to share in this important moment, and would have come and been happy wherever the service had taken place, and whoever they had been sat beside, were oblivious.

One person who received no official invitation to the wedding but was there to play the organ in the chapel was Jure, who is blind. This year he was again in his usual place in the chapel, leading the singing of the hymns and playing. When we went to say hello to him after the service one Sunday evening, as he was being led home by his wife, amongst the jostle of congregation and visitors, his face lit up. He was pleased to 'see' us, and said how good it was for us to be there, because we belonged there, in that village. It was a wonderful welcome; from this humble man – acting as a gentle host, to us - who back at the time of the wedding, in the drama of the preparations - had forgotten to invite him as a guest to our reception.

Jesus accepts an invitation in our Gospel today to a meal on the Sabbath with a leader of the Pharisees, where position and prestige - who has been invited, and where they sit in relation to one another - are of utmost importance and define and regulate social status. It is clearly an uncomfortable occasion, with the gathering hostile and edgy; all the eyes of the guests are on him, they are keen to know where Jesus fits into their pecking order, ready then to put him in his place. But Jesus is quick to speak into the situation, and, with two deft stories, aimed first at the guests and then the host, punctures their sense of self-importance, and their false system of values. He is uncompromising, forcing both guests and host to look to themselves, and question their own place and behaviour, rather than his.

'When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, go and sit down at the lowest place' he says to the guests taking the places of honour. It is entirely in the hands of your host where you are to sit, do not presume to place yourself higher. 'When you give a meal do not invite those you know or want to influence but invite those who are the lowliest, who have no chance of repaying you, the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind' he says to the host. His words turn the values of their world upside down.

Meals in our day do not act in the same way in setting social structure, but who receives an invite and where they are seated is still cause for the bolstering or bruising of egos.

In Sebastian Faulks' novel 'A Week in December', a satire on contemporary London life, the events are set in the context of a dinner party that is being planned by the wife of an up and

coming newly elected conservative MP of the Notting Hill set. She gives her guests both a hot and cold seat, depending on whether they will get on with the person they are seated next to or not, encouraging them to move part way through the dinner, her dilemma, whether to sit them first in their hot seat, to get the evening off to a blast, or to start with the cold, so that after the move the evening warms up to a good crescendo. The whole A-list event is meant to bolster her husband's career.

Jesus is not teaching those gathered about clever ways to get on and be the A-list in God's eyes, he is showing them the right attitude of heart. To know that their and other people's worth in relation to God is all that matters. His words are words of life and freedom and equality; words to unbind and free us from the prisons we create for ourselves, from our culture's contexts of power and esteem of who is up and who is down, who has influence and who does not; the systems that seem so trivial, like the ones that Faulks takes a pot shot at in his novel, or the ones that are deeply engrained into our culture in the way that the etiquette of meals in Jesus' day reflected social hierarchy: –

Class structure, wealth, education, job title, whether we are able bodied, or have a home to live in, or struggle with addictions, or are seeking refuge from violence or hardship in a country that is not our own.

In the freedom Jesus offers none of that matters. Our worth and the worth of others is simply in terms of God's acceptance of us, even in our weaknesses and blindness. When we can recognise that, we are able to see the true value of those around us, regardless of status calculated in any other way. It is this humble recognition that Jesus' parable of inclusive table fellowship invites us into.

In the many occasions for sharing food together in the Gospels Jesus is modelling what the life of God's kingdom is like, where all are equal, each person invited to be there simply through the love and generosity of God. And where all who find and know that love can *only* take the lowest place.

Taking the lowest place was highlighted this week when someone broke into the replica cell that's in the Courtyard here at St Martin's as part of the charity Reprieve's campaign for the release of Linda Carty, who is on death row in the United States.

In an article about the incident in the Guardian the writer says; "*Perhaps there was no more space at The Connection, the wonderful, charitable homeless centre round the corner from the church. No matter what the explanation, life must be grim for someone to break into death row.*"

Knowing the value and welcome that Jesus offers to those who are seemingly outside the system, speaks to us when we are at rock bottom. In God's eyes we are of infinite value and a welcome guest. It is often only when we have fallen outside the systems of our culture that give us value, and our guard is down, then we are open to experience the liberating acceptance and welcome of God. Really know what it means to receive his hospitality. But, once we have known the acceptance of that humble place it defines the way we lead our lives.

It calls us to offer that same acceptance and welcome to others in the spirit of mutual love that our reading from Hebrews describes for us. Its hearers are encouraged to follow Christ's example of loving service, doing good and sharing what they have for the sake of it, not for any reward or privilege.

Mutual love: shown in hospitality to strangers, in loving marriages, in a right relationship with money and possessions, and in caring for those in prison and the victims of torture. And doing all of this in a spirit of worship and love for God.

For us: mutual love for those in the lowest place through offering what we can to help those in Pakistan who say everything they ever had has gone; mutual love in the support and help for homeless people at a time when government support and services are cut back; mutual love for those we may have thought of leaving off our guest list, mutual love in our refusal to look at others and behave towards them as if they were anything less than a welcome guest of God; mutual love in the hospitality shared with strangers and friends and angels in this congregation.

In the midst of the passage from Hebrews we hear of the constancy of Christ's love and welcome to us...born of his love for us, when on the cross, *he* took the lowest place.

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever.

Our name is always on his guest list.