

Proper 17 Year C 2022

The wonderful thing about St Luke is his ability to tell a story in an engaging, even compelling, way. Here he has Jesus at a meal - he so often has Jesus at a meal. Just as John, in his Gospel, chooses water at his motif of life - just have a look at how many chapters of John's Gospel are about water - baptism was clearly central to the church John was writing for - so for Luke, the central motif is the shared meal - the table around which we gather to encounter God in Jesus - Eucharist.

So, Jesus goes to the house of a leading Pharisee on the Sabbath to eat a meal. He doesn't need to go, someone else would have fed him - and he was quite used to going without - but he accepts this invitation even though he knows they are out to trap him - Luke says 'they were watching him closely'. Why go into the lions' den? Because he loves them and wants to help them see where they are going astray and how they can return to the place where they think they are, and yet are far away from.

And as they wait for him to make a mistake, something they can accuse him of doing wrongly, or something he should do but doesn't - he tells them about how to behave at a banquet -

indeed, a wedding banquet - which in his culture would have been a very formal, stylized event for this class of people, attended, of course, only by the men. Here is the way to avoid being embarrassed - sit at the bottom of the table so that you can be called higher, don't sit at the top so that you suffer the shame of having to walk past the other guests on the way down to the lowest seat. Luke's text could be Miss Jean Brodie telling her girls how to behave when they leave school and move into the social world of their parents. But it isn't - because this is not a teaching on social niceties - it is a parable - so not at all related to the day to day lives of the men listening to Jesus around the table of this leader of the Pharisees. It is a parable about God's Kingdom, and the wedding banquet at the end of time. Who will be invited to that banquet? Well, it is obvious, isn't it? Israel. Come the Messiah, Israel will be invited to the great Messianic banquet. They will be first; they will sit in the place of honour, because they are God's people. Indeed, Israel may be the only people at the banquet, because who else could possibly have been invited? (Well, read the next part of Ch14 of Luke's Gospel, to see who else is invited - it follows on from today's reading, but we don't get it next Sunday). But remember that Luke is writing

for a mainly *Gentile* church - so maybe they think 'Israel has failed the test and will be sent lower (or even not invited) and we will be in the place of honour' - and then what division there will be in that Christian community, if some of them are Jews.

Jesus isn't talking about party etiquette, if he had wanted to do that he could have quoted from the Jewish wisdom tradition - there's plenty of advice there.

Worldly wisdom teaches us how to behave acceptably, how to fit into society. But the teachings of Jesus are not wise in that sense. They are not counsels about how to win friends and influence people. Jesus says 'blessed are the poor' but they are not blessed - at the moment they are frightened about how they will feed and clothe their children, and keep them warm. In this world, the poor are not blessed, the meek inherit nothing, those who hunger and thirst all too often go unsatisfied - especially if you hunger for peace and thirst for justice. And so this story of the marriage feast really is a parable - it is about not a Jewish wedding, but the Kingdom of God, and Jesus lives out this parable in his life. St Paul puts it this way 'Though (Jesus) was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself taking the form

of a slave, being born in human likeness, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross' (Phil 2). If the cross were the end, we might say that the life of Jesus was a wonderful example, but an example to be admired rather than imitated, for who would want to imitate an example which ended in rejection, humiliation and death? But death on the cross was not the end; it led to resurrection and opened for us a way to the wedding feast of the Kingdom, where those who mourn are comforted, and the merciful are shown mercy, for which reason, St Paul tells us 'God has highly exalted him, . . . so that at the name of Jesus every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father'.

But if the instructions about where to sit is parable, it seems to me that the suggestions about whom to invite to your dinner party are more likely to be instructions. This meal is being held on the Sabbath. The men will have been to the synagogue. The poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind would not have been welcome there. Contact with them could render you ritually unclean. Luke portrays Jesus as the one who believed that blessing comes to those who recognise that the poor should be included in any and every celebration. He is trying to show his

host that his Sabbath joy should come from doing God's will, from caring for those who cannot care for themselves; care for the disadvantaged was/is part of God's will - and doing God's will is an experience of grace.

Belief in the resurrection was what marked out Pharisees. The 'just' would be rewarded. Luke offers us a crib course in how to achieve our reward at the resurrection, just as Matthew does in ch.25 of his Gospel. Perhaps God will ask 'who was at your last dinner party?' 'Did you invite my untouchable friends?' Which reminds me that the last time I gave a party I invited only church people- so perhaps my report card reads 'could do better!, must try harder'. But isn't that true of all of us? Could do better, must try harder'.