

Luke 14 1, 7-14

We join Jesus this week, as he has a meal with a leader of the Pharisees. It's a special meal, because it's the Sabbath. And it's no ordinary family meal. Luke, who is familiar with Greek customs, describes the meal in the manner of a Greek *symposium*, a meeting to debate important matters, whilst sharing food and drink. This is a meal for dignitaries, lawyers and Pharisees, who have invited Jesus to debate with them. These men and we can safely assume that no women are invited, are specialists in Hebrew law, the Law of Moses.

There has already been some tension. When he arrives, Jesus heals a man; then he poses a question about healing on the Sabbath, which they refuse to answer. Jesus demonstrates by *his actions*, his interpretation. It is lawful to heal on the Sabbath.

This is not a confrontation between ignorance and wisdom. These men are specialists; they know how the Law has been interpreted over hundreds of years. Nor is it a standoff between 'goodies' and 'baddies'. These men are devout. They have taken the trouble to meet with Jesus and debate with him, because they recognise he is worth taking seriously.

But the atmosphere is pretty tense and both sides are scrutinising each other. The Pharisees watch Jesus, as he challenges them over the law of the Sabbath; Jesus watches them, as they chose the positions of honour at the table. And Jesus' response is to tell them a parable about someone coming to a wedding banquet and being bumped down the room by someone more important.

Now we might imagine that this is a lesson about being humble. Don't put yourself on a pedestal, because someone else might bring you down. But if that's all Jesus is saying, then it's a bit obvious. Anyone might know that kind of wisdom. But Luke is clear this is a *parable*; there is another meaning below the obvious one.

In this symposium of important dignitaries, we can notice that *unimportant people aren't invited*. It may sound offensive to our modern ears, but in Old Testament terms, people who are socially disadvantaged, or are women, or have disabilities, or are Gentiles, are considered to be lesser people, not blessed by God and none of them would ever be invited to a meal of dignitaries.

But Jesus addresses his host, who is surrounded with all his important guests and says don't spend your life on lunches for this type of person, who can pay you back. Instead, give banquets for all those who never get invited to your table-the poor, the crippled, the lame and blind and you will be repaid by God. Because if you are generous to those who honour you, you have your reward already; but if you are rich towards those who are not important in this world, *God* sees what you do and *God* will reward you, in the fullness of time.

It is a parable about the generosity of the Kingdom, to show us that everyone is equally blessed by God and equally welcome to God's Sabbath meal. We are all invited to the table, and we serve God, when we welcome everyone also.

Now, you might think this is a parable about our personal lives, but I want to raise a question about something else, our lives as a church in this local community.

Depending on how you measure it, about 2% of people in the UK are regular church goers; which means that 98% of people never or very rarely come into a place like this. If Jesus lived in the flats opposite, I wonder where he would go to find people on a Sunday? Would he come here, or might he go to a football game, or a shopping centre, because that's where to find people on Sundays?

I am not at all against tradition. We have a way of doing church that has grown over several hundred years to communicate a rich theology and church history. Here at St Paul's, we want to worship in the best way we can, but I wonder if sometimes, we have become specialists in *Churcianity*. We know when to sit and when to stand, when to come forward for communion, or which books to use. Because *we know* how to do church, so *we already have* our own reward.

But when we have visitors, we expect them to fit in and make *us* feel comfortable, by following our way of doing things. What kind of host invites people to their house, but says you must speak like this, you must sit here and stand there, you must be quiet here and walk there, and your children must go there and play this way?

People outside here don't know what we do; they don't understand it. If everyone is invited to the table, how are we going welcome those who don't feel invited-Do we need to think about sometimes doing church differently? Because if Jesus grew up in one of the block of flats opposite and came to church today, would he feel welcome? Would he even know what to do and how to behave in our church tradition? Or might he say to us (myself included) you are very devout and you are experts in doing tradition and sometimes, you are just like the Pharisees?

Amen