

First and Last

Jeremiah 2:4-13; Luke 14:7-14

Eating is essential for life; no one can manage for very long without it. One of the greatest things we can do as human beings is to share food together. Though dining alone has its benefits and pleasures, there is something wholesome and engaging in eating together with people that you like.

Over the years the etiquette around dining has evolved immensely. If you have ever been to a formal dinner the issue of menus, who sits where, and who is invited in the first place are matters fraught with social peril.

Can you begin to imagine what it must have been like to have had Jesus as one of Your guests? Admittedly He might have come in handy when you were needing some more bread and fish, and of course you would never have run out of wine, but just think. Even setting to one side the fact that nobody really knew, or believed, that He was the Messiah, what would you and your other guests have made of this challenging, insightful, slightly awkward carpenter's son from Nazareth, with His steady gaze, with His searching mind, and with His sharp tongue?

Jesus is dining in the house of a leader of the Pharisees one Sabbath. As the various incidents unfold, Jesus is the One Who is more than prickly at the table, who challenges the lawyers and Pharisees; who rebukes the guests who jockey for the best seats at the table, and who tells the host who he should invite to his next meals. By both ancient and modern standards, Jesus might be called a rude guest. The wary Pharisees are reduced to silence.

In Luke's Gospel, meals are metaphors for the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God represents the world as God intends it, in contrast to the world that is. Jesus warns against hubris at the dinner table – knowing very well the human tendency to prefer the 'best seats in the house'. Instead of assuming the privilege of place and being humiliated by being downgraded, better to go to the humbler place, and perhaps be pleasantly surprised to find that your host might call you to come up higher.

There is a lot of watching going on in this story from the Bible. The Pharisees around the table watching Jesus. What more is He going to say? Will He wash before eating? Will He follow the rules about table etiquette? They watch to gather evidence; they watch to see if they might be able to convict Him.

Jesus' watching is different. He's not watching the rules, He's watching the people. He's watching the people subtly or not so subtly elbowing their way to the top table. He's also watching to see who is there, and who is not. "Here's a little tip," Jesus says. "The next time you are invited to a wedding, do not take the best seat in the house. What is going to happen if someone more distinguished shows up?" Far better to let others recognise your achievements than to brag about them yourself.

But Jesus is looking not just at those who are at the table, He is looking to see those who are not there. Being a host or hostess carries with it many pleasant and positive connotations, such as friendliness, generosity, graciousness and concern for the comfort of others. These are all good things. Jesus looks and wonders if those who are hosting are only being generous towards those from whom they expect a favour in return. Does the guest list only include those who are able to return the favour?

When it comes to the Kingdom of God, God is the host. Who can repay God? It's a challenging thought. Do we invite, from time to time, or at all, those who could never repay us, from whom no expectation of repayment is considered? It's not just about table fellowship, it's about the very goodness and generosity of our hearts not motivated by pity, but by compassion. There is a radicality in what Jesus says. He sees the Kingdom people as the ones on the fringes, the ones on the outskirts of things, and He brings them in. It's a fairly consistent theme with Him.

It's not simply about providing for the poor, the isolated, the ignored. That's not a bad thing and is to be encouraged strongly. It is about inviting them to the table. This is the New Testament's understanding of hospitality. The word translated as 'hospitality' means, literally, 'love of stranger.' Hospitality isn't only about welcoming those we like, and making room for them at the table. Christian hospitality is about welcoming those who are in no position to host us in return,

or give us anything back other than their thanks, and they might not even do that. Not everyone can receive hospitality, however well meant, with graciousness. Christian hospitality is about host and guest sitting at table together. It is the clearest sign of acceptance, of recognising others as equals. We break bread together. Jesus urges a social system without reciprocity.

As I read and re-read this passage, it seems to me to say more than simply table fellowship and whom we eat with. It says something about the kind of society that we live in. When we look at politics, who is at the table? Who are the people who are doing the talking and the deciding, and who are the people who have opted out or have been pushed out?

When it comes to economics and the way the world shares it's wealth, who is at the table? Who are the people who have much, and who are the people who have little? Is there a need to redress balance? Or share equitably? Not a charter for fecklessness, or abuse, but an intention to help those who struggle and hurt, and for whom the systems of social care and economic benefit do not help, whichever government is in power.

When it comes to issues of gender, or sexuality, or age, or race, who is at the table? Who are the people who have privilege and entitlement? This was a big issue when I attended the American General Assembly, particularly when issues of race were still boiling over into street violence in the cities and towns of the US. Privilege is usually invisible to those who have it. It is those of us who have a certain amount of privilege who choose a place of honour, assuming it is rightfully ours.

Jesus watches, and turns privilege on its head, every chance He gets. The Kingdom He preaches has a place for everyone, and everyone is treated the same, for all are welcome, not because of what they have, or what they have done, but because of who they are.

One of the things we need to be aware of in this church is that though many are privileged, that does not apply to everyone. There are people here who may struggle because of money and its lack, or opportunity and its lack, or gender, age, health status, background or whatever. Which is why in this church and in every church we need to ask that question: who is at our table? People just like us, or those who are different because they think or behave differently. It is an

exciting and a disturbing prospect at one and the same time. It is, however, the Kingdom of God of which Jesus preaches.

Who is at the table? Is there a first and a last? Are some more welcome than others because they are more equal than others? Not only in the church, but in our homes, in our workplaces, in the social circles we move in. Who is at the table?

It was once the tradition in some European countries to set the Christmas Eve table with a place for the unexpected guest. The most intimate family meal of the year provided for including a stranger who represented the Christ-child for whom there had been no room at the inn.

Jesus looked around at the Pharisees' table to see who was in the high place and who was in the low place. He looked around to see who was there and who was not. "Who sits at the table, who holds the power? There's a difference between, 'yes, you can come' and 'yes, you are invited.'"

And that's what these little stories are about. If hospitality is near the heart of the good news of faith, then inclusion is at the heart of hospitality, for it tells us about who we are, and what we value, and how near, or far, we are to the values of the Kingdom of God. In our homes. In our work places. In our politics and economics and charity work. In our Church.

First or last, welcome or unwelcome, noticed or unnoticed. Who is at your table?

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen