

Who is at the table?

Proverbs 21:1-2, 8-9, 22-23; Mark 7:24-37

It was lovely to see so many people at the event on Friday night where I shared some of my adventures from last year as Moderator. One of the things that is quite brutal about the Church of Scotland system of selecting Moderator's is that you are barely in office for two days before the process of finding your successor begins. Two weeks ago I chaired the committee that has now selected the short list to find my successor's successor.

One of the questions we will be asking prospective Moderators for 2019-2020 is, 'Have you thought about a theme for your year.' Lorna Hood did a lot of work with Srebrenica following the massacre there, and she'll be in our Church next month to talk more about this. John Chalmers did important work about respectful dialogue, particularly during the Independence referendum, and has continued that work in Israel-Palestine, South Sudan. Angus Morrison championed the Gaelic language in Scotland. My predecessor Russell Barr did immense work highlighting the plight of homeless people in our country. My successor, Susan Brown, has chosen, 'Walking with', looking at pilgrimage and how important conversations can be had whilst you are walking through the countryside.

I chose 'hospitality'. Partly because I like to eat and drink, but partly as a tribute to this congregation and our Social Committee with others. We have a justifiably high reputation for offering quality hospitality at nearly all the events that we organise in Morningside. You have **not** had your tea until you come to this congregation! Partly also because I believe that if you are in a place of privilege, it is better to build a longer table than a higher fence.

In his sardonic book, *The Devil's Dictionary*, Ambrose Bierce defines the word hospitality:

Hospitality, noun. The virtue which induces us to feed and lodge certain persons who are not in need of food and lodging.

The definition is between two other words – *Hope* and *Hostility*.

Christianity can be defined in many ways, but for me one of the most significant is 'hospitality'. "Christianity's default position is hospitality, even as we received hospitality on the cross of Christ." We are 'prejudiced towards hospitality, because that's the way God treated us, and how we are supposed to treat others.'¹

In our reading from Mark's Gospel we see Jesus redefining what hospitality meant for Him and the people of faith. Was He tired, was He not focussed when the Syrophenician woman came to Him asking for help? He initially was dismissive. God's blessing was first for the faithful, Jesus said. "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But the woman didn't let go. "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

Jesus got it. He remembered, He understood. God's welcome isn't only for those on the inside of faith, it is for everyone. That was hard then, and it is still hard today.

Who is really welcome? If they're not like us; if they don't look like us; if they don't sound like us; if they don't dress like us; if they don't act like us. When we say 'all are welcome', do we really mean it, or are there dog whistles sounding all around, so high that only the unwelcome dogs under our table hear them, and all they hear is that, "this isn't really for you; you'll need to wait and see what's left; you might be happier somewhere else." **Jesus** had to be reminded that when God welcomes everyone, reaches out to everyone, wants everyone, all means **all**.

In the family of God all find a place at the table; there are no outsiders any more. Nobody on the outside, everybody on the inside. All means all. The people we like, the people we don't like. Different colour of skin. Different lifestyle choices. Different genders. Different ages. Different faith traditions? And all those other people, broken and bad, welcomed in by our generous Lord.

Who is at the table in the life of faith? Who is kept away, and why? Where is the radical welcome? Who is at the table of society, and who is kept away, and why? In the hospitality Jesus eventually showed towards Syrophenician woman, what are we being told about our Church and our community? The former Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has written:

“In thinking about religion and society in the 21st century, we should broaden the conversation about faith from doctrinal debates to the larger question of how it might inspire us to strengthen the bonds of belonging that redeem us from our solitude, helping us to construct together a gracious and generous social order.”

Who are under the tables and looking for crumbs around our cities, towns and villages, just waiting, waiting to be called up, and invited to sit with us? None so broken they can't be mended. None so wicked they can't be forgiven. None so sick they can't be healed. None so lost they can't be found. None so unable to keep their promises that they can't be given another chance. None so unclean on the inside that they can't be purified. None so narrow-minded that they can't be enlightened. None so stuck in their ways that they can't be moved. None so hard-hearted that they can't be softened. None so invisible that they can't be seen.

Hospitality in the name of Christ is more than a slogan about 'inclusiveness' and more than a warm welcome. Christian love is love in action; it is a move to incorporate. The American theologian Will Willimon writes, “The 'friendly church' is often a congregation that puts so much into 'us' that little room is left for welcoming 'them'.”ⁱⁱ

This difficult and challenging story from Mark's Gospel has shattering implications for *who* we welcome and *how* we welcome and *why* we welcome. It certainly speaks to the Church as we adapt to a world that isn't sure what it believes and how it should relate to the people of faith and their churches. There has never been a more vital time for us to be hospitable to people who are not hostile to faith, but not sure of its relevance to the C21st world.

This story of hospitality reveals to us the heart and the practice of God, and this perplexing Jesus Who welcomes all. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, body and strength, and love your neighbour as yourself. There's Jesus, there's the Syrophenician woman, putting it all into practice before our very eyes. Getting it wrong, then getting it right.

A true story is told of a Presbyterian Church in Georgia when a man in shabby clothes ambled in during a Sunday service. Everybody looked at him and made up their minds that he probably wasn't up to much good. Everyone knew that he wasn't one of them. The Church members

stepped aside as the stranger entered. He sat by himself in a pew towards the rear. Everyone cast nervous glances in his direction, wondering if he would disrupt their worship. When the offering plates went round everyone half-expected him to help himself. At the close of the service the man arose and quietly departed.

After the service the Church people stood under the big oak in the church grounds, talking in serious and muted tones. They probably didn't know how to say it, but everyone knew that God had put their Church to the test. And everyone knew they had failed.

God is always on the move beyond the boundaries of what we think is acceptable or right or comfortable. At the table of God's love, there is room enough for everyone. It might remind you of something Desmond Tutu has said: *"We may be surprised at the people we find in heaven. God has a soft spot for sinners. His standards are quite low."*

Just as well – or we might find ourselves with the dogs under the table – waiting for the leftovers and the crumbs – never expecting that one day – the Son of God might call us by our name, lift us up from the floor and gently make a place for us beside Him, and His heart.

Hospitality, at the heart of humanity, and the heart of our faith. Who is at the table; in our homes, amongst our friends, in our Church? Who are the people waiting, still, to be invited, not to a private, exclusive club, but to a public, inclusive family of questioning, warm-hearted, generous, followers of Jesus. There might be people who think they might only get crumbs under the table because that is all they assume they'll get. Let's drop up a chair and say, "sit with us", you are not only welcome, you are personally invited.

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

Amen

ⁱ William H Willimon, *Fear of the Other*, p7

ⁱⁱ *ibid* pps 77-78