

## Sermon – Trinity 11 – 28<sup>th</sup> August 2022 by Rev. David Ford.

Imagine the scene.

You're all dressed up for a marvellous celebration dinner at a big hotel. Scores of people have been invited. The foyer is buzzing, the champagne is flowing and you slowly edge your way through the crowd towards the big easels displaying the seating plan. Will you get a good enough seat to hear the speeches, to see the stage, to stand a chance of your food still being hot?

Your heart sinks; you're not as important as you thought you were; not only are you on table 24, you're also behind a pillar...

One of the reasons I love the stories Jesus told, is that they are so human, so enduring, so capable of crossing continents and centuries. We can all imagine ourselves there.

Or can we?

For Jesus' banquet is rather different. There is no seating plan; we're to choose where to sit. Go on, admit it, given a free for all, you would be tempted to rush forward to the front tables, wouldn't you?

Our gospel reading is a wonderful story because it is going to be heard differently according to the self-esteem of the hearer. The poor and rich hear a very different story to one another. The poor are embraced and exalted; the rich, humbled. A story straight out of the Magnificat, Mary's song.

Jesus sets his parable at a wedding banquet; a quite deliberate reference to the Kingdom of God; a statement of how things will be; how things could be:

RS Thomas conveys such imagery beautifully in his poem, The Kingdom:

It's a long way off but inside it

There are quite different things going on:

Festivals at which the poor man

Is king and the consumptive is

Healed; mirrors in which the blind look

At themselves and love looks at them

Back; and industry is for mending

The bent bones and the minds fractured  
By life. It's a long way off, but to get  
There takes no time and admission is free,  
if you purge yourself  
Of desire, and present yourself with  
Your need only and the simple offering  
Of your faith, green as a leaf.

Yet Jesus' teaching doesn't stop at this lesson on humility. He then launches an incredible assault on his host. It's hard to imagine anyone having the audacity to do this in public. Even if you've had an awful evening, surely you save your criticism for the privacy of the journey home. Not so Jesus – he almost begs to be dropped off his host's Christmas Card list:

"You've invited the wrong people", Jesus says. "Look around you; all your friends, relatives and rich neighbours can invite you back. That's not hospitality; that's an unspoken deal; a meal for a meal; rather than an eye for an eye. If you want to be truly blessed, invite those who can't return the favour – the poor, the lame, the blind - not those who now most certainly will..."

Hospitality, in Jesus' eyes, is not about reciprocity, the two-way traffic of day-to-day friendships. It's about unconditional love. It's about the gift that cannot be re-paid; it's an invitation to give in the way modelled to the most of extreme lengths on the cross.

If we turn to our reading from Hebrews, hospitality undergoes a further twist: there may be more to the stranger than meets the eye. The stranger on your doorstep, may be an angel.

Trusting the stranger takes effort and even courage; after all, we're all influenced by 'stranger danger' messages; behind every stranger lurks a threat we are told.

At times this is going to be true; yet, we can probably all think of times when a stranger has become a friend or at the very least a time when we have slowly

had to change our perception of a stranger, as their humanity or their genuineness has revealed itself. Not so long ago there was a fabulous advert – I cannot remember what for – in which a hooded teenager is presented as a stereotypical threat, until he comes to the rescue of a lady whose shopping has just spread all across the pavement. He picks it all up for her. The stranger, becomes the angel.

The writer of the Hebrews goes further in this exploration of hospitality and calls us to act not out of sympathy alone but out of empathy. Remember those in prison or the tortured as if you were alongside them in their trials. Be passionate about them in their suffering, not simply feel sorry for them.

True hospitality is a sign of the Kingdom breaking through into our world.

And the church offers true hospitality more often than we might think. Much of our witness is undertaken with no expectation of reward or favour. Baptisms, weddings and funerals are a case in point. As is our pet service in a few weeks' time. As is The Chatterbox every Wednesday; as are our tentative plans for providing a warm welcome to the community this winter.

Doing the right thing is so much more important than speculating about whether anyone will notice or whether there is some level of payback coming our way.

The increase in the fuel cap on Friday was truly staggering and frightening. How any of us keep warm this winter is becoming a very real question. And this is a very big question for churches too, as for us there is no price cap and we expect our church bills to double, or triple in the weeks to come.

The DCC will decide what to do and we will take advice from the Diocese too. I expect us to be given permission to work in our hall if we wish instead of in church. We could simply turn the heating off and accept the cold. We could return to online worship only – that too is a possibility for the coldest months.

What I hope we can do, is remain a place of hospitality. We could even see people come to church on a Sunday in the expectation that it will be a warm place to be.

With the exception of the “super rich”, we are all in this together. But it is also a time to live our beliefs from the bottom of our hearts. As our passage from Hebrews ended: “Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.”  
Amen