

Year C Proper 22

Prov 25: 6-7

Hebrews 13: 1-8 & 15-16

Luke 14: 1 & 7-14

As you may well know, I have recently returned from spending two weeks on Iona. For each meal in the Abbey refectory, we sit at benches sitting 6 or 7 people, on both long sides of six tables. Scattered amongst the laid places are simple laminated sheets to reserve a place amongst the week's guests for the staff and volunteers to sit and share the meal with the guests. No one sits at the head of the table, although one person sitting at the table is assigned the role of serving up the meals delivered to the end of each table.

During the week the staff, volunteers, and guests move around the tables and get to know each other over the meals. No-one seems to stick to the same place for the meals, and even if the table closest to the kitchen may be thought of as the 'high table', no one treats it like that.

With that style of seating there isn't really a way of jostling for the places of honour. Perhaps people may want to sit next to the Abbey Warden, assuming she is the most important person there, who holds a position of authority and power, but I have never witnessed that sort of behaviour. I like to think that coming into that intentional community and living and working together helps to negate the sort of behaviour Jesus was calling out in the gospel reading we have just heard.

I am so used to this style of eating in Iona Abbey that I hadn't really given it much thought, until I read today's gospel reading. The Iona

Community, as intentionally lived out in the Abbey, does aim to allow everyone to live as an equal and serve each other. Mealtimes enable this ethos to be lived out, as we give thanks for the food and for those who made it.

In our gospel reading Jesus' message is very clear.

Firstly, we are not to assume that our privilege means we are entitled to sit at the high table. In our reading some of the guests assume their status gives them the right or privilege to sit in the places of honour.

I would like to take this point a bit further, and ask whether we always recognise our privilege? Just by accident of birth, in this country, in this age, we have an advantage over most people in the world. I am not suggesting we feel guilty about this, but it is something we should be conscious of. In terms of our world, we are sitting at a privileged place at the table. In the reading from the letter to the Hebrews, the recipients were exhorted to remember to show hospitality to strangers, to remember those in prison and those who are ill-treated as if we were suffering ourselves. The writer reminds the listeners that doing good and sharing with others is a sacrifice which pleases God.

Secondly, our gospel reading challenges us about our habits of hospitality. He challenged the people of his day, where there was a strong ethic of reciprocity. Any sort of gift came with an unspoken expectation of reciprocity. Getting invited for a meal always came with an expectation of a return invitation and strengthened the social cohesion of a particular social or business community. On that basis, the privilege and social strata were maintained and were almost totally impervious to access by someone from a different social or economic group.

This second challenge by Jesus makes me feel uncomfortable. It makes me uncomfortable because I know I share meals and will do more of this now the high risks of catching COVID have reduced, with people who are like me. Although I do not expect an invite in return, I am not extending my hospitality in my house to those who are excluded; the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, as Jesus asked the host of the banquet to do.

The only time I in any way feel I can say I have been close to behaving as Jesus asks of us, was when I used to organise the team to cook and serve meals in the winter night shelter for Bethany Christian Trust. And even then, it wasn't as Jesus wanted. We, the privileged, cooked the meal and served it to the 'service users'. We seldom had time to sit alongside them and share the meal with them and to be honest there was some trepidation about sitting beside some of the homeless whose behaviours were erratic and whose personal hygiene wasn't as we who have access to toilets, hot showers and a warm home can attain.

After one of these evenings each person on our team had a choice of how they processed what they had experienced. I am sure some just pushed it to the back of their minds, the discomfort of witnessing how some people lived was too unsettling. Then there were others who may have decided to pray about those they saw and met, and from those prayers most decided to commit to volunteering again or take other steps to help those that society has shunned and would prefer were not there, who walk past and try not to see or acknowledge the homeless.

These readings do, I hope, challenge us. How can we as a church family show hospitality to strangers? The first step, it seems to me, is to consider whether we welcome strangers in to church, and perhaps far far more importantly, whether a 'stranger' would feel as if they

would be made welcome if they took the brave step to cross our threshold one Sunday morning.

How are we perceived by people in this area who do not match our socio-economic profile? What if they are from an ethnic minority, or are unemployed and hardly scraping by on benefits, or had a same-sex partner, or had a visible disability, or are what is called neuro-diverse – had a level of autism, for example? What if they are a young twenty-something a couple of generations gap between us? Would we be like Christ, and welcome all, for we are all made in the image of God?

Jesus challenged the host, that when he gives a banquet, he should invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind. When we hold our Sunday services and come together at the Lord's table for our banquet, do we welcome all, and will all feel welcome?

I for one, do not see myself as the gatekeeper at the Lord's banquet each Sunday. God invites us to welcome all, and that is how I believe we should respond.

What can we do, individually and collectively, to show our neighbours that all who may choose to enter here will be unconditionally welcomed to share in the banquet we prepare each week?

Maybe one way is to invite people to share in our actual banquet – our brunch on a 4th Sunday – without them having to have attended the church service beforehand. Over this next year there will be many who will find it impossible to afford to heat their homes and put hot food on their table. Maybe we can extend our table, and invite more people to eat with us, people who are not like us?

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews, in the last verse we heard read today states; 'And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.'