

Year C, Proper 22. 31st August 2025

Proverbs 25:6-7. Hebrews 13: 1-8, & 15-16. Luke 14: 1 & 7-14

Being a blessing, what a challenge!

Many of Luke's stories from chapters 9 to 19 have a theme of conflict. In today's reading Jesus is not being the perfect, well-behaved guest. He points out behaviours which run counter to God's kingdom. I'm pretty certain he was not asked back by that Pharisee.

Jesus highlighted the ways in which the realm of God establishes its own social and spiritual order. Presuming a place at or near the high table shows a lack of humility and in God's kingdom it is unwise and possibly a sign that the individual lacks a true understanding of God's values for his realm.

So how does a preacher tackle this issue?

If I preach about always assuming the lowest place at the table, it risks that those who are already well aware of their lower social status will seek an even lower position, and feel more unworthy. They may seek to do more to show their worth as well, whether it be giving their last coin away, or whatever. Others may see that this approach means that their preferment in the eyes of God comes by showing a false humility and a race to the lowest place, so as to get God's prize for being the most humble. Well, yes. That may be what it looks like, but that individual's heart has not changed, their values haven't changed, and God knows us too well to be fooled.

This scenario Luke paints for us also re-affirms that our human ideas of success and of power are not the same as God's measures of success. Verses 7 to 11 describe the nature of life under God's reign, culminating in verse 11 stating: 'For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.' This story is not just about us as individuals, but also us in our groups, our communities, even our congregations, our ethnic group or religious groupings, our nationality. These collective identities can carry privileges that we are conscious or unconscious of.

This example of table fellowship is just one that Jesus uses to explore the nature of God's kingdom. It provides a rich metaphor. Jesus tells his host that the table should receive people who are not the host's friends or relatives, or rich neighbours, or anyone the host wishes to influence. The invitation to the table should be for those who cannot repay the host, who are unable to reciprocate by inviting the host back for a meal. Jesus rather bluntly lists those he says should have been invited: the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind. Jesus is clear that when you extend your table to invite such as these, you will be blessed and seen as righteous in the eyes of God.

Righteousness is therefore when the host ignores self-interests and treats everyone well and is hospitable to all, welcoming all to receive and be fed. Jesus' message could not have been clearer then at that meal, and cannot be clearer for us today. The table fellowship Jesus was calling the host to provide described God's kingdom. Jesus' pastoral ministry likewise was inclusive, and as followers of the way of Jesus, we are called also to live such a life, individually and collectively.

When we gather as a faith community around this altar, this communion table, every Sunday, we are called to also foster a fellowship of equity and hospitality, an imperfect but honest attempt at being part of God's fellowship with all humankind, established through and in Jesus. At the Greenbelt Festival last Sunday morning, we sat on the ground and shared communion with the random neighbours sitting adjacent to us. It was a real mixture of folk, with little to identify our social or financial standing, but with some obvious visual clues about ethnicity. We were a very temporary community of faith brought together at that moment in time, and I reflected that we had some of the features of what Karl Barth described as Christian hospitality in fellowship¹:

- ✚ As a community it offers unity among peoples that overcomes national, ethnic, and linguistic barriers;
- ✚ It is blind to racial differences;
- ✚ Responding to the plurality of human cultures, the ministry of the people of God brings different people together to overcome cultural differences;

¹ Karl Barth: *The Doctrine of Reconciliation*.

✝ In its pastoral work the Christian community sets aside class distinctions in society between rich and poor.

Barth was deeply concerned that hospitality and fellowship must be central to the church's ministry, reflecting the life and teachings of Christ. The realm of God establishes its own social and spiritual order and we are asked, or more accurately, challenged to live such a counter-cultural life.

God asks us to live into our God-given createdness through our everyday acts towards every person we encounter, and in and through our relationship with God and all of creation. When we respond from our love of Jesus and our deep desire to bring glimpses of God's kingdom to those who haven't experienced it, we find we also receive God's blessings – not in terms of power, wealth, social advancement, but through coming even closer to God in peace, in love, and feeling more whole, being who we are called to be. It is through participating in God's acts of mercy and love that we grow and have our being in Christ.

It is not easy or simple. Being a blessing to others is itself very challenging. Aiming to live righteously encourages us to live our lives with honesty as we seek justice and do our best to adhere to sound moral principles and behaviours in the context of our time and place in the 21st century.

The challenge is not to seek blessings, but to live our lives as a blessing. As you reflect on this passage, you may wish to pray for the Holy Spirit's guidance; to know your greatest challenges and what practical steps can be taken to live a life of blessing. And also, what may we as a family in Christ do to be a blessing on lives in this area. On this latter point I am truly interested to hear your views. Please do get back to me with your ideas.