

God's Alarming Hospitality and Our Fragile Identity

Sermon for the 12th Sunday after Pentecost, Year C, 01 September 2019

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT Australia

Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell

Proverbs 25: 6-7; Psalm 112; Hebrews 13: 1-8, 15-16; Luke 14: 7-14

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

Friends, today's familiar Gospel reading isn't about being nicer to poor people and the disabled, helped along by a vapid and predictable sermon—though it ought to help us make a breakthrough in how we regard others. And it's not about hating the rich, either, enlisting us for a radical protest movement—though it may help us re-evaluate our principles and priorities in life. Today's Gospel represents a challenge to both the right and the left, to the conventional and to the conventionally radical: there's something in today's Gospel to offend everybody. Let me show you what I mean.

First of all, Jesus is being set up in today's Gospel. He's a guest at the Sabbath luncheon in a wealthy, strictly religiously observant household, and all the Pharisees are there. All eyes are on Jesus, to catch him out, to put the purity meter on him and find him wanting. Their invitation looks like hospitality, but it's not. And Jesus is

certainly up to the challenge! Now, I ask you, has anything changed? Jesus and his dream for humanity are always a threat to the pharisaically-minded: in the Church, in the commentariat, among the chic atheists—everywhere.

Jesus looks around at the luncheon and what does he see? All the social climbers, poseurs, *bien pensants* and lovies are on display, all jockeying for position, for influence, to be noticed, to look important—the usual thing. And the Pharisees are happy to preside over all this typical human neediness and one-upmanship, blessing the status quo. Seeing all this, Jesus really gets up to some mischief. He starts quoting scripture to his hosts—how could they object to that? He references the verses from Proverbs that we heard this morning, about not seeking the place of honour so that when you're invited up to that place your success looks even more impressive. At worst it's a passage that's unashamedly about improving your gamesmanship, and at best it offers some strategic advice about getting on better in life if you don't big-note yourself. But in Jesus' hands this passage is given a significant twist, turning it into a critique of all such self-serving wisdom. The wedding feast that Jesus mentions recalls the great image of God's creation fulfilled, the coming Kingdom or reign of God. Jesus' message is that God the host of that great celebration knows who'll be getting the places of honour, and that those who think they deserve them may be in for a

surprise. Jesus' teaching about the humble being exalted at the expense of the proud suddenly seems less like the sort of advice Dale Carnegie might give to the aspirational and more like a wake up call to the spiritually delusional.

Hospitality, dinners, deference, greasing the wheels: these all represent typical business as usual. But Jesus is telling us that God reveals a different hospitality. God's hospitality cuts right across any need we might feel to have our own worth affirmed. As God's beloved guests and friends we don't have to build ourselves up by eliciting shows of support from others, by buttering others up to gain reciprocal accolades in return. Instead, it's God who gives us honour, and who testifies to our worth. As a result, we who bear the mark of the cross on our foreheads in baptism are already in a very secure and exalted position. We're given a clear and unambiguous 'yes' from God sufficient to counteract every 'no' and every ambiguous 'yes' that we'll ever receive in life.

Jesus goes on to declare that God's special guests are not the well-connected, not the savvy networkers, not the self-consciously politically correct—no-one whose identity is established at the expense of anyone else's. Rather, God's heart goes out to those outsiders in every human calculation of self-interest, declaring them to be insiders when it comes to God's mercy, to God's offer of

solidarity. Jesus died among the wretched of the earth, the unlovely, among the victims who're told that they deserve whatever they get. And, friends, this compassion isn't the familiar sort of charity that's dispensed from on high, just as it isn't righteous indignation directed against the rich from the pinnacle of a pure ideology. Rather, it's actual solidarity with the whole struggling, compromised human family that Jesus demonstrates for us. It's not superior, or remote, or judgemental, but it's not sentimental or uncritical either. And from this the Church's particular calling emerges.

Jesus calls and empowers his Church to be a community where the likes of you and me find enough confidence in our identity as God's beloved children that we can give up having to prove anything at anyone else's expense. That way we learn to relax about ourselves, and this lets us become friends with all sorts of people who we might once have avoided or overlooked. Remember that Jesus mixed as easily with the tax collectors and prostitutes as he did at the top end of town, where we find him in today's gospel. Likewise, his Church became a place where men and women, Jews and Gentiles, slaves and their masters, were treated as equals and were all equally welcome. And so it should be in our Churches today—in our parishes, and especially in our Eucharistic assemblies.

In our Hebrews reading today, we see another perspective on what I'm talking about. Our Hebrews reading celebrates the Christian life as a high calling marked by spiritual fearlessness, and with that by radical solidarity. In a persecuted Church like the one we hear from in Hebrews today, strangers might seem threatening, but we're called on to let such strangers surprise us—they may be angels rather than devils! The imprisoned and tortured who are mentioned in today's reading are Christians who need to be embraced, not avoided.

Our Hebrews reading today also mentions marital fidelity in the Church as a sign of God's faithfulness, held up as a reminder to those who might think that God's faithfulness doesn't need such sacramental, institutional expression—who're content just to fool around in the world of relationships. This is marriage not as an impossible ideal and not as a romantic dream. Rather, it's a call to see marriage in larger terms than our society tends to see it—not just as a love match, or as a practical arrangement when you reach a certain stage in life, but as a participation in God's grace and in God's mission. This sense of marriage as a special way of participating in God's creation, salvation, and mission led the medieval Church to define marriage as a sacrament.

The logic of all this teaching in Hebrews today becomes clear when the writer also encourages us to respect our leaders in the Church, who had better be good role models to us of Christian faith and life. The writer wants to see the Christian vision shine out and transform our troubled world. And if we can live that Christian vision, as priests and lay people, as husbands and wives, as fellow Christians in solidarity with those who it might be easier to ignore, then others will see it, too, and be attracted to it, inspired by our example. We can only do this through Jesus, of course, as our Hebrews passage concludes today—by becoming part of his sacrifice, which entails both praise to God and compassionate solidarity with others. This joint witness is what we enact in our Eucharist today—here we're caught up in Jesus, here we anticipate God's dream for humanity, and here we find a solidarity together that goes beyond every conventional human distinction.

Friends, this is Jesus' Eucharistic alternative to the unwelcoming religious meal that we see in today's Gospel. Here in the Eucharist, in solidarity with the despised and crucified one, who is now lifted up in the resurrection to be Lord of all things, we find a new identity, a new freedom from the lifelong burden of self-justification, and we also find any number of unlikely new friends.

The Lord be with you ...