

2nd Sunday after Trinity (21 June 2020)

Luke 14:16-24

Numbers matter. Particularly in these days of Covid-19, we must think carefully about how many people we meet, how many can go into M&S at once. Our sympathy must be with those families who have had to be exceptionally selective when organising funerals. Large gatherings have become problematic: whether it is for health reasons, or simply because the thought of having to cater for a large group of people fills us with dread. For the host in our Gospel reading this morning, things couldn't be more different, for whom numbers seemingly pose no issue.

It's important to remember the parable's context. Jesus is dining with the Pharisees, who get a bad press in the Gospels. Their observance of the letter of the law and their concern for purity often get in the way of worshipping in Spirit and truth. The words of Amos, "let justice roll like waters and righteousness like an ever-living stream" seem to have fallen on deaf ears. Jesus' words in today's parable are not just a pretty fable, but a challenge to his Pharisee hosts, that in the parable the servant does not only invite the righteous to come and dine, but there is room for all at his table, even and especially sinners.

Luke's Gospel is concerned with universality. We are told from the beginning that Jesus did not just come for a select group of people invited previously (the Jews) but the whole world. Simeon recognises that Christ is a 'light to lighten the Gentiles', and already in the Nativity stories, we see the non-Jewish *magi* among the first to meet the infant Lord. Here in today's reading it is not only the 'first invited' who come to share in the banquet, but all: the "poor, the maimed, the halt and the blind" included, not people who would have been seen at a Pharisee's dinner party. The message here is that the love and provision of God, the omnibenevolent host, are wider and more abundant than the Pharisees could ever have imagined. We see this abundance throughout the Gospels, especially John's Gospel: the wedding at Cana, or the feeding of the 5000 with plenty of left-over bread. The banquet, the rich provision of God will never run out.

In the 21st century, when we are told that we are free to be whoever we want to be, the language of sin and weakness has fallen out of favour. But it is precisely the maimed, the halt, and the blind in this parable that we are called to identify with. Not just because we are invited last (we are Gentiles, not Jews), but because we are weak and sinful. We have marred God's image in us. But luckily for us, we are not invited to this banquet, to the Eucharist, by our own merit but by God's Grace. As a prayer of invitation puts it:

*Come to this table, not because you are strong, but because you are weak.
Come, not because any goodness of your own gives you a right to come,
but because you need mercy and help.
Come, because you love the Lord a little and would like to love him more.
Come, because he loved you and gave himself for you.*

Last week we celebrated the Feast of Corpus Christi, our annual celebration of thanksgiving for the Institution of Holy Communion, and this parable with its reminder of our unworthiness to be invited, should increase our gratitude for the invitation to partake in the sacraments, to come and eat at table with Christ in this foretaste of the great heavenly banquet, the marriage supper of the lamb.

Note that it is indeed an invitation to **come**, to enter into the household of faith, that is the Church. We cannot remain where we are, but need to cross the threshold. A banquet cannot be individual activity, but requires a commitment to community and fellowship. The generosity of the invitation must be met by a response of commitment, of taking a step to enter in and be incorporated. When those in the Parable come to table, they cease to be mere individuals, but become part of a body. The blessings of the host, the blessings of God, come in the context of community; look back to the Old Testament covenants to see that, although often named after one person (e.g. Davidic or Mosaic covenants), they are always between God and His whole pilgrim people.

It was D.T. Niles who described evangelism as one beggar telling another where he found bread. We can continue to invite all to join the Church, the community of pilgrim people, who share in the sacramental life of the Church, safe in the knowledge that at Christ's banquet there is more than enough to go around. That the invitation is indeed open and unrestricted.

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