

Who is at our table?

Jeremiah 2:4-13; Luke 14:1-14

The Jesus of Luke's gospel is certainly preoccupied with eating. Not only is it implied that some people think He is a drunkard and glutton, but there are in Luke's gospel more references to eating, banquets, tables and reclining at tables than in any of the other Gospels. The table is one of the Lord's key places for teaching, for reproof, and for encountering those who were marginalised. The table serves as a focal point for some of Jesus' parables. Tables, and the people who gather around tables, are close to the heart of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke, and that should not escape our notice.

Like every conscientious teacher, Jesus was a keen observer of human behaviour. Our story starts with, "When He noticed how the guests chose the places of honour, He told them a parable..." It sets the scene as Jesus is dining at the house of a leader from the Pharisees. The Pharisees are watching Him closely, but they are in for a surprise. Jesus is watching them closely too, and He remarks on their behaviour.

This story reads oddly to good Presbyterians, like us. Who in their right mind, let alone in their good manners, would claim the best seats at an event. Schooled in years of 'don't push yourself forward', most of us, like most people in the Church of Scotland, lead the rush for the back row seats. It has been interesting watching people working out where they were going to sit in this Hall when we moved worship through here from the sanctuary, and it will be interesting to see where people will find themselves sitting when we go back through to the sanctuary next month.

Who will sit in the front seats?

Whether we are in the seats of honour, or in lower seats, does not, I suspect, matter much to God. The point is that at His table, all are welcome, and all will have a place not because we've earned it or done anything to deserve it, but because God wants us to be there, as His guests and His friends. Hospitality is the heart of God's love for each one of us, and God wants us to be with Him.

Christianity can be defined in many ways, but for me one of the most significant is 'hospitality'. "Christianity's default position is hospitality, even as we received hospitality on the cross of Christ." We are 'prejudiced towards hospitality, because that's the way God treated us, and how we are supposed to treat others.'ⁱ At God's table all are welcome.

There is a Near Eastern proverb that says, "I saw them eating and I knew who they were." It's true, inviting people to eat with you can be a sign of your prosperity, but it can also be an act of service and love and welcome. In the early church, common meals were a way of meeting physical needs but in such a manner as to embarrass no one. Those who had and those who did not have sat at table together without distinction. Table fellowship means full acceptance of one another. Even in our day in a pluralistic culture with a range of table customs, eating together has important social meanings, both expressing and creating community.ⁱⁱ None of us is to claim the top seat by right, but we will, each one of us, find a place in the table fellowship of God. This *radical* assertion that all will be embraced by God. That in the family of God, all find a place at the table; that there are no outsiders any more. Nobody on the outside, everybody on the inside. All means all. The people we like, the people we don't like. Different colour of skin. Different lifestyle choices. Different genders. Different ages. Different faith traditions? And all those other people, broken and bad, welcomed in by our generous Lord.

One of the insightful things at our weekly Wednesday coffee morning is watching this welcome work, and not work. The easy friendships, and the strained ones. The words of support and the words of criticism. The falling outs and the fallings in. Around those half dozen tables every Wednesday all human life, its strengths and its weaknesses, is seen. The greatest joy is the welcome given to our visitors from the Royal Edinburgh Hospital, who have found a home, however temporary, here. All are welcome at our table, the broken and the whole, the soft-hearted and the sharp tongued. It is at tables like that where we can learn, and maybe re-learn, our manners and our better behaviour. Where we can offer thanks, and apology, whichever is needed. I read recently that, through experience, those who most need to hear a word of grace

are more likely to hear a word of judgement, and those who might benefit from hearing a word of judgement are more likely to hear only grace!ⁱⁱⁱ

Who is at the table in the life of faith? Who is kept away, and why? Where is the radical welcome? Who is at the table of society, and who is kept away, and why? In the hospitality of Jesus, and His welcome of all, what are we being told about our Church and our community?

The former Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has written:

“In thinking about religion and society in the 21st century, we should broaden the conversation about faith from doctrinal debates to the larger question of how it might inspire us to strengthen the bonds of belonging that redeem us from our solitude, helping us to construct together a gracious and generous social order.”

Who are at the edges of our cities, towns and villages just waiting, waiting to be called down, and invited in? None so broken they can't be mended. None so wicked they can't be forgiven. None so sick they can't be healed. None so lost they can't be found. None so unable to keep their promises that they can't be given another chance. None so unclean on the inside that they can't be purified. None so narrow-minded that they can't be enlightened. None so stuck in their ways that they can't be moved. None so hard-hearted that they can't be softened. None so invisible that they can't be seen.

Hospitality in the name of Christ is more than a slogan about 'inclusiveness' and more than a warm welcome. Christian love is love in action; it is a move to incorporate.

Hospitality reveals to us the heart and the practice of God; it is a hermeneutic of hospitality that makes us look again at this perplexing Jesus. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, body and strength, and love your neighbour as yourself. Who is at our table? Might Jesus Himself be at our table? Is He truly welcome?

I wonder what Jesus would make of the broken tables today in the political meltdown ongoing in the United Kingdom. When democracy is, in my view, undermined by the cynical proroguing of Parliament. When views from every side of a bitter debate are swept away by people who have decided that there is nothing more to say, and where respectful dialogue has been silenced and

the listening to divisions quashed. When the greater good is for sitting down at table and talking until something like common sense might emerge. What would Jesus make of the broken tables around our land, where few now sit, and coming to a consensus for the national good seems distant? Would not Jesus sit them all down, every last one of them, and keep them talking until at last the greater good of all the people might be achieved? At a table. The Johnsons and the Corbys. The Rees Moggs and the Swinsons. The Sturgeons and the Fosters. And all the rest. And keep them talking, and eating, and drinking until something workable eventually emerges.

Oslo is an award-winning play set in the 1990s and tells the true story of Norwegian diplomats brokering discussions between the warring Israelis and Palestinians. *Oslo* is a wonderful and moving work that portrays how real diplomacy works. The play shows us what can happen when men and women on opposite sides of what is perceived as an intractable divide strive to create a shared humanity. The play is inspired by Norwegian diplomat Mona Juul and her husband, Terje Rød-Larsen, who together coordinated months of top-secret peace negotiations between Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Palestine Liberation Organization Chairman Yasser Arafat in the early 1990s. Their strategy was to provide a comfortable room with a table filled with food and drink as inspiration for finding a connection and perhaps, eventually, a compromise. A table, food, drink, talk. Realised community. Barriers cracking. Hope persistently refusing to be quelled. It still has work to do, but it shows a way forward. We need some of that today in our country.

God is always on the move beyond the boundaries of what we think is acceptable or right or comfortable. At the table of God's love, there is room enough for everyone. It might remind you of something Desmond Tutu has said: *"We may be surprised at the people we find in heaven. God has a soft spot for sinners. His standards are quite low."*

Who is at our table? Are we brave enough to talk and listen until we, all of us, in the high tables of national politics, and the coffee tables of a church hall, discover and rediscover our common humanity and needs. And remember that at our table, bidden or unbidden, Jesus Himself sits with us.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ William H Willimon, Fear of the Other, p7

ⁱⁱ Fred B Craddock, Luke, Interpretation Series p78

ⁱⁱⁱ Ronald P Byars, Feasting on the Word, Year C Vol 4 p21