

Invited

Isaiah 25:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14

I can't remember who it was who asked for the one that is on the text board for this month. It is taken from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, who is writing to a Jewish people in exile in Babylon after the invasion of the kingdoms of Judah and Israel and the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple.

"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins."

In these days of horror and terror and disbelief in Israel-Palestine and Gaza, these words ring both hollow and hopeful to me. Hollow, because I often have doubts if they will ever come true or make a difference. Hopeful, because if I do not believe comfort and peace and an end to warfare for all peoples will come, then I have lost something essential from my faith. Not simply the willingness to pray for peace, but the living peaceably and gently and respectfully and compassionately in my own daily life. Might that be the same for you?

We may not be on the frontline between the state of Israel and the Gaza strip and the West Bank, but all of humanity finds itself, on the frontline today. The frontline between barbarity and civilisation. In this conflict, as in all of the others across the world, edged from the headlines by this new horror, amongst the many appalling realities is those on opposing sides are forgetting the people they murder, the people they bomb, the people they deny water, and electricity, and freedom of movement, are human. The dead, on every side, are somebody's child, somebody's mother, somebody's brother, somebody's grandparent, somebody's friend. The tunnels prepared

for guerrilla warfare; the massing of troops on a border; the instruction that a million people, a million, should abandon their homes, and go where, in a piece of land no bigger than the Isle of Wight.

I have been to those areas, the border land between the Israelis and the Palestinians. I've been in some of those overflowing hospitals and bombed homes. I've been in some of the kibbutz and old folks' homes. Now empty, now in ruins, now under the shroud of terror and darkness. I have sat around some of those tables, and eaten with Israelis and Arabs, Jews, Muslims and Christians, and it is the image of the table, the eating and drinking together, that through the bombs and bullets and rubbles, still gives me hope.

In this time of hunger and thirst and want and war, God resolutely invites us to gather around a table, and share together. Around the flat place that is the table we have to look at each other face to face. When we eat, we look; and when we look, we listen; and when we listen, we find humanity, and see God in the face of humanity. The best of them and the worst of them. The most extraordinary and the most ordinary. The children and women and men. You may think it easy enough to say and believe, but in the face of what we see today, it remains hard to live and to insist upon. To say all are welcome, to the hardened Israeli Defence Force soldier, and the fanatical Hamas terrorist. To the Ukrainian conscript and the Russian politician. To the Taleban fundamentalist and the Afghani woman. To the white supremacist and the African American civil rights campaigners. To the people perpetuating toxic cultures in our political discourse and newspapers. To the misogynists and homophobes. It's easy enough to say that all are welcome, those people and communities we have 'othered'. Do we mean it? Do we live it?

Our Old and New Testament readings have at their heart tables and food. In the Bible the table and food repeatedly serve as metaphors for God's activity. We are invited to sit at God's table.

"My table Thou hast furnished in presence of my foes", we sang a few moments ago. A few weeks ago, we gathered symbolically around the Lord's Table at communion and shared bread and wine. The reality of what that means is what is happening in the news today. What we learn from the Bible is that mealtime is more than food. Whilst the day is accentuated by different meals, and our lives are marked by celebration feasts at birthdays and anniversaries and funerals, and Christmas and Easter and more, we find that life's larger stories, the good and the bad, are marked by eating. Mealtimes are more than just food. The fact that they play such an important part in the Bible, where God is the host and the provider, must mean something.

God's table is set for friend and foreigner, strong and weak, wealthy and needy. Together we are to be reconciled and share in a common meal. The meal gives occasion for us to be shown again not only God's promise of comfort, but God's promise of hope. All are welcome at God's table, however uncomfortable that makes us feel. It is not our invitation; it is His. At that place we will find God's sustenance, and where there is hurt or wrong or resentment or pain, *"God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of His people He will take away from all the earth."*

God is a God of life, not a God of death, "A God Who ends war, slavery and exile, not by political power or military might, but by upholding past promises",ⁱⁱ and inviting us to us to a table and sitting us down.

In Jesus' parable the worthy and the unworthy are invited. Some accept the invitation, and some do not. If you are worried about the guest in the story who is removed from the party because he is wearing the wrong clothes, that's not the point of this story. He's heard Jesus' invitation to the feast and to enter into God's kingdom. But the man hasn't prepared himself and has failed to take the invitation seriously. He's a bit like the older brother in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Both have come within the structure of grace, but in their failure to see and be glad in that grace, they

have excluded themselves.ⁱⁱⁱ The point is not about fashion or expensive clothes, it is about being clothed with your faith, your hope, and your love, and showing that to the world. If you respond to God's, "You are invited", be serious about it, and understand it brings responsibilities in how we treat God, in how we treat others, and in how we treat ourselves.

I am reminded again of *Oslo*, an award-winning play set in the 1990s and tells the true story of Norwegian diplomats brokering discussions between the warring Israelis and Palestinians. The play is inspired by Norwegian diplomat Mona Juul and her husband, Terje Rød-Larsen, who coordinated months of top-secret negotiations between Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Palestine Liberation Organization Chairman Yasser Arafat. *Oslo* portrays how real diplomacy works. The play shows what can happen when people on opposite sides of what is perceived as an intractable divide strive to create a shared humanity. Is there something to learn in current humanitarian catastrophe in Israel-Palestine, in Ukraine, and in political debate in our country today? A table, food, drink, talk. Realised community. Barriers cracking. Tears wiped from eyes. Hope persistently refusing to be quelled.

On a day like this and at a time like this in the history of our world, providing an authentic word of hope in the midst of harsh circumstances is one of the most important things as your Minister I am called upon to do. On any given Sunday some of you will come to church primarily to hear that there can be a way out of your predicament. Many of you will believe that God intends some relief from the pain you are bearing. The prophet Isaiah provides a model for how confidence in God's plans may be restored even during the most trying of challenges.^{iv}

God's presence in Jesus is broadly inclusive and utterly decisive. The wedding invitation has gone out to the world. It's not about fitting it into your busy schedule. It's about changing you're the

way you live. Say yes, because of faith; say yes, in the hope that you and the world will yet come around; say yes, with a life clothed in love and lived richly and fully.

You are invited. You have a place. How will you respond?

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

Amen

ⁱ Isaiah 40:1-2

ⁱⁱ Jeffrey W Carter, Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 4 p148

ⁱⁱⁱ Leith Fisher, But I say to you, p275

^{iv} James Burns, Feasting on the Word, Year A, p147