

Go up higher*Jeremiah 2:4-13; Luke 14:1, 7-14*

Picture it: Balmoral Castle Estate, September 2017, early evening. The Late Queen, a now former Moderator, assorted royalty and aristocracy, and some challenging American guests. The haggis-stuffed grouse is sizzling gently on the barbecue; the simple, rustic, vintage wines are taking the air to breathe; servants scurry unobtrusively in the background, not getting in the way.

Her Late Majesty noticed the American guests rearranging name cards at the table for the simple six course barbecue supper. Not much amusement. Everyone went outside to admire the view but the Late Queen kept the former Moderator back, held her finger to her lips, and quietly went round putting the cards where they ought to be, but made sure the helpful former Moderator was moved up the table to sit beside her, and the rebellious Americans sank lower down the table to where the late Duke of Edinburgh would be sitting. "He'll sort them out one way or another," she laughed. The guests reassembled at the dinner table later. Great consternation amongst the Americans and suppressed smiles from those who knew what she'd done.

Whether the story is true, or not, it helpfully illustrates the principle of, 'go up higher', who is invited to the table and where they are seated. The Jesus of Luke's Gospel is undoubtedly preoccupied with eating and sitting at the table. He had already been accused of being a glutton and drunkard by His enemies. There are more references in Luke's Gospel to eating, banquets, tables, and reclining at tables than in any other of the Gospels. The table is one of Jesus' favourite venues for teaching, reproving and encountering those who were often marginalized. The table is a site for fellowship and conversation for Jesus and should not escape our notice.

The everyday activity of home and marketplace, farm and fishing boat provided Jesus not only revelations of the true character of His listeners, but also opportunities to reveal the way life is supposed to be in the Kingdom of God. The Pharisees had been watching Jesus. But Jesus was watching them.

What began as a meal became a moment of deep teaching. Jesus watched how the guests chose the places of honour and used this opportunity to teach about humility, hospitality, and the radical values of God's kingdom.

Jesus challenged the social norms of self-promotion. He told a parable about choosing the lowest seat at a banquet, reminding us that true honour comes not from exalting ourselves, but from allowing God to lift us up. It's a direct call to humility—not just as an attitude, but as a way of life. Jesus turned to the host and pushed further: don't invite just your friends and wealthy neighbours who can repay you, but also the poor, the outcast, the broken—those who cannot give anything in return. Jesus upended the world's reward system and revealed the heart of divine hospitality: grace offered freely, not exchanged for advantage.

In this tiny little moment in Luke's gospel we are invited to see beyond appearances and status, and to live in a way that reflects the inclusive, gracious, and humble heart of God. The church does not need to mirror the world's hierarchies. But rather model the open table of Christ, where all are welcomed and valued—not because of what they bring, but because of who God is.

In a world obsessed with recognition and self-promotion, the call to humility can sound like weakness. Jesus reminds us that the way of the Kingdom is not about climbing ladders of status: it's about choosing the lower place, the servant-hearted posture.

Jesus doesn't simply give good advice about table manners. He redefines honour itself. In God's economy, the humble are the exalted. The last are first. The invitation is to let go of the need to be noticed and instead be content in being known and loved by God.

But watch how you react to as well as apply this teaching of Jesus. There are already those who are humble-hearted, who get the idea of serving others, and who do not need to go any lower. Jesus does not require His servants to be doormats to the world. He asks us to be self-aware and to reflect not only on what we do but why we do it, and for whom. Do we serve others in order to be noticed, and to make ourselves look good, perhaps especially in our own eyes? Or do we help because, well, it's simply the right thing to do?

The principle of humility is underrated. The practice of humility is hard to achieve consistently because it has not only to do with our motivation, but also with the essence of who we are. Some do not serve because they think others should be doing it. Some do not serve because they do not think themselves worthy enough.

The teaching of Jesus is clear: serve! Help! Volunteer! Share! Give!

This is not only about service; it is about who we welcome, and who we include. Jesus isn't only interested in the imperative Christians have to provide for the needs of the poor and the disabled: He says to invite them to the table. This is the New Testament's understanding of hospitality. The word, 'hospitality' means, literally, 'love of a stranger.' Or even, 'love of an enemy.'

Pope John Paul II wrote: "Welcoming our brothers and sisters with care and willingness must not be limited to extraordinary occasions but must become for all believers a *habit* of service in their daily lives." He also said, "Only those who have opened their hearts to Christ can offer a hospitality that is never formal or superficial but identified by 'gentleness' and 'reverence'."

God wants us to form communities, whether they be churches, or groups within churches, that show the friendship and fellowship between God and all humanity by establishing this kind of friendship with each other. Communities that reach out to all nations, offering unity amongst peoples that overcomes national, ethnic and linguistic barriers; communities that refuse to accept that racial differences segregate; communities that recognise the broad range of cultures that go to make up the world in which we live; communities that go beyond class and economic distinctions between rich and poor.

It is clear that this teaching from Jesus has both relevance and challenge to the world in which we live. The rise of far-right political groupings in the UK, the US and Europe where politicians and their supporters, 'other' people from different countries, ethnic, social and cultural backgrounds create a culture of fear, recrimination, and abuse. It's immoral. It's sinful. It's unchristian. This is not simply my opinion but Jesus' teaching and practice. At the table - a communion table, or any table, for Jesus, all are welcome. There is no 'them and us', only 'us'. Our challenge is not only to say the words, or even believe the words, but to put the words into practice.

I've told the story before of a Presbyterian Church in the southern United States when a man in shabby clothes ambled in during a Sunday service. Everybody looked at him and made up their minds that he probably wasn't up to any good. Everyone knew that he wasn't one of them. The Church members stepped aside as the stranger entered. He sat by himself in a pew towards the rear. Everyone cast nervous glances in his direction, wondering if he would disrupt their worship. When the offering plates went round everyone half-expected him to help himself. At the close of the service the man arose and quietly departed.

After the service the Church people stood under the big oak in the church grounds, talking in serious and muted tones. They probably didn't know how to say it, but everyone knew that God had put their Church to the test. And everyone knew they had failed.

One of the strengths of our Church is, whilst we're not perfect all of the time, most of the time we are welcoming, and hospitable, and generous. We make a place for the stranger, and they are welcomed. This kind of hospitality, calling others to come up higher and to be with us not because we are better but because we are welcoming, reveals our true intention. This hospitality offered with purity of heart and humble gratitude reveals that God's kingdom etiquette is the great equalizer. And how about this: as we invite others to sit with us at our table, who knows, maybe Jesus will come and sit beside us also. Is there room for Him?

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

Amen