**Be my guest!**

*Hebrews 13:1-3, 8-9, 15-16, Luke 14:1, 7-14*

*31st August 2025*

I wonder if we have listened carefully to the words we’ve just sung. They describe in a rather succinct way how the word of God works in the context of worship. It starts with the text – that is our Scripture reading, then comes its retelling – that is something the preacher contributes, but it also involves everything we all bring into the melting pot; all our experiences, feelings, joys and anxieties, which then hopefully ends up in a new, enriched understanding; An understanding that will help us to be better disciples. It is good to be reminded of this from time to time and to be aware that *we together make this hour of worship what it is* rather than it being a kind of ‘one-man, or one-woman’ show that we attend and judge with a thumbs-up, or thumbs-down mark. We are all responsible for it!

So, after this disclaimer (!) let us see what we can learn together from our Bible readings today. As we heard the Gospel reading takes us to a dinner party. Dinner parties are opportunities to eat and socialise together. We know quite a lot about this here at AFC, for even though we may not call them dinner parties, we have many occasions to eat together. These are events when we can elevate one of our most basic human needs, taking nourishment, into an important relational event with our fellow human beings. The Bible is full of references to meals, banquettes and feeding of people. Important things are happening during and through meal times.

On the very first page we have a young couple eating some forbidden fruit with dire consequences. It continues with an elderly couple feeding some strangers with amazing consequences. Then a whole nomadic tribe is being fed with miraculous food ‘from heaven’ helping them to survive an enforced migration. So it goes on and on. And it culminates in the great prophetic vision of the ultimate heavenly feast hosted by God, symbolising the fulfilment of all human striving in a perfect fellowship with God and all peoples *(Isaiah 25:6).*

This was the tradition in which Jesus grew up and in his own ministry meals also played significant roles. Things tended to happen at meal times when Jesus was present. He unexpectedly healed people. He let his feet be anointed by an interloper woman; he washed the dirty feet of his disciples. He forgave a repentant tax-collector. And he wanted to be remembered by the bread and wine he shared with his friends at his last meal with them.

In our passage today Jesus is at a Pharisee’s table and he is observing the other guests jostling for the best places. So, he is using the opportunity to give some teaching about being a good guest. He recommends not to sit in the honoured place, in case it is kept for someone more distinguished. It is better to sit at the lowest place – he says - and then being invited upwards and thereby avoiding the humiliation of being moved ‘downwards’ from a higher place. Well, this advice, which closely echoes some verses from Proverbs 25, can be understood on different levels. If we understand it literally as an recommended strategy to get ahead in the world, it seems to suggest that humility is the way to success. In theory, as Christians, we would probably agree with it, but whether it works in practice is another matter. The world doesn’t seem to work that way. There you have to sell yourself and putting yourself down will not get you very far. So, how are we to understand this humility? It’s not very straight forward, is it?

Even in Christian terms to humble yourself *in order to* achieve a higher position makes for an insincere behaviour. Your aim is still to be elevated and to get to the best place. Not to mention that it makes you complicit with the social order based on categorising people by their wealth, their education, their gender, their politics, etc. Does that sound like the Jesus we know from the rest of the NT? Yet, Christianity has always set great store by advocating humility as a virtue. Unfortunately, the idea has often been misunderstood, misused and even abused for keeping certain parts of society ‘in their place’. We can think of the sanctioning of slavery, to enforce the inferior status of women and other minority groups. Putting yourself down then may not be what constitutes humility. And putting other people down will certainly not make them humble. I rather like C S Lewis’s definition of humility. He says *Humility is not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less.* It assumes a healthy self-assessment, knowing your strengths as well as weaknesses, but keeps it within bounds and turns the attention to the other person.

The other reason for questioning the literal understanding of these words is that, Jesus gives them as a parable. Now, parables were not stories to tell people what to do. They were meant to make you think. They were meant to find yourself in them, come face to face with your own actions and behaviour through someone else’ story and see yourself with an outsider’s eye – as it were. So, if this is a parable we may not meant to understand it as an instruction, but try to see whom are we most like in the narrative. Are we more like those, who want their rightful places at work, in the family, at church? Or are we those who always seek out the seats in the back row, never wanting to stand out, or attract attention to themselves? Or are we undecided about our place in the scheme of things? Perhaps, just standing around, waiting ‘to be seated’ not wanting to cause offence to anybody?

Well, knowing Jesus as we do from all the available sources, it is more likely that he is subverting the whole underlying concept of classifying people and having more and less honourable seats in the first place at their dinner parties. He, himself has never made such distinctions and he felt ill at ease whenever he found himself in such situations. He seems to understand though the problems of being a guests. It is not easy to be a guest. Once you have accepted the invitation, you have to give up being in control. You are now in someone else’s territory and they are in control. Whatever you may think of yourself, now you have to be

open to others’ assessment of you, which may not be to your liking. Yet, it never deterred Jesus from being there, sharing the risky business of being a guest along with all sorts of other invitees.

And as he concludes his parable he widens the lens to another dimension, where none of these anxieties need to arise. There is an invitation by the most gracious and loving Host to a quite different dinner party he calls the Kingdom of God. The promise to its fulfilment may be in the future, ‘they will be humbled’, ‘they will be exalted’, but it is possible to bring that future into the present by already living as the loved and cherished guests of the greatest of Hosts.

If we think back for a minute to the film we mentioned earlier, it is most likely we would find Jesus at *Table 19* at that wedding reception. There he would share the celebrations in the company of the mistreated best friend, the forgotten Nanny, a bickering married couple, a misfit High school student and a socially awkward young man with a dubious past. Why I think Jesus would have been there, because as the evening unfolds, these strangers get to know each other, they open up to each other with all their hidden, regretful secrets, they begin to care for each other and finally they unite in trying to secure the happiness of the demoted maid of honour by helping her to a touching reconciliation. In spite of their seemingly rejected status this group of disparate people find a way of being and acting as accepted and honoured guests. And this is surely the sign of that promised Kingdom.

May God help us to find our rightful place as accepted and honoured guests at the great feast lovingly prepared for us by the most generous of Hosts!

**Amen**

*Erna Stevenson*