6th October 2019

Luke 14.12-24; 17.5-10

Most celebrations involve a meal. Last night’s Harvest Supper was a celebration of our Upper Hall being refurbished and what better way to celebrate that than making use of our new catering kitchen.

If you celebrate a birthday, a wedding, an anniversary, even a person’s life after a funeral – food is a vital ingredient and a meal a chance to sit down together with friends and family to talk, laugh, share and celebrate.

As a minister I’ve been to my fair share of banquets for this and that. Wedding receptions are always interesting. Partly because of the extravagance that some people go to and partly as to the atmosphere at some of them. I once was invited to a reception of a wedding I performed back in my last church in Warrington. The reception took place in the upstairs of a pub. People sat round in a circle staring at one another. It was the bride and grooms second and third marriage and there was a bit of an atmosphere. No one spoke. Everyone just seemed to be waiting to get away.

In contrast to that my brother’s wedding a few years ago was a riot. A five-star hotel. A plush meal. A swing band to entertain us in the evening, including a singer who thought he was the embodiment of Frank Sinatra. The cringe factor came when he got Debbie, my wife up on the floor and serenaded and danced with her. She said she was smiling on the outside but dying on the inside. The party would have gone on and on had it not been for one of the guests who was worse for drink collapsing on the disco equipment and breaking it.

I find it encouraging that heaven is described as a party. A banquet. Where all are invited and there will be much feasting and laughter and fun. A positive image of a faith filled life in contrast to many people’s preconception that the religious are poo faced uptight miseries who don’t know how to have a bit of fun.

The Bible has the Messianic Banquet as a vision of the future restoration of creation and the coming of the kingdom of God: e.g. read Isaiah 25.6, or Revelation 19.9. All will have enough to eat; all will have a seat round the table. Communion is a foretaste of that vision and how the world will be, although it isn’t at the moment. Hence Jesus biting parable.

He starts off by saying most dinner parties are about people inviting like minded people in a social gathering of mutual benefit. Often you invite people who think may be advantageous for you to know. Jesus of course had the context in his day of small villages where people knew one another, and meals were often eaten with the doors open and people wander in to and fro. In cold wet Britain we have a different context – but it shouldn’t be an excuse for ignoring the sharp edge of Jesus saying. He calls us to think about sharing hospitality with those who are unable to pay us back. To be good neigbours in other words.

But we also need to acknowledge our creator, the divine host of all that we have and share and enjoy. So, Jesus tells a story about a banquet in which all are invited. But when the feast is ready people start to make excuses. They very rudely snub the invitation. They have business to attend to, they would rather make more money than spend time with the host. They have just got married and would rather be in the company of their newly wed than other people’s company. The householder, having gone to all the trouble of organizing and paying for a lavish meal, is determined to have guests at his table, even if he has to find them in unconventional places. The original guests have ruled themselves out and others have to come in to take their place.

The first level of meaning should be clear. Jesus had gone around Galilee summoning people to faith – come follow me – acknowledge God as your creator and follow his ways. Come to the great Supper of the kingdom of God. Treat people with dignity and equality. Have respect for God’s creation. But some people can’t be bothered because they are caught up in their own business and they love money or other things, more than they love being part of the kingdom of God.

I spoke about love of money being the root of all evil last week. We invite you to take part in Traidcraft campaign against investor-state disputes settlements. Under the ISDS parallel justice system, corporations and companies can sue countries when they think that government decisions or court rulings impacts their profit. For example, if a community opposes a mine contaminating their water supply and a judge rules in their favour to stop the project, the company behind the project can sue your country for interfering with its profits.

Too often the vulnerable lose out. During the financial crisis of the last decade the Argentinain government froze water prices to ensure it was still affordable for the poorest communities. In response water companies, including Anglian Water, used ISDS system to sue the government for lost profit. The tribunal dismissed arguments that people’s human rights to water should come ahead of company profits and Argentina was ordered to pay out £251 million to the companies. That was one of 900 cases brought against countries so far. The rulings, these so called ‘Red Carpet Courts’ give, can be so financially devastating for countries that many respond by offering vast concessions, such as rolling back their own laws. Traidcraft exchange are campaigning against these courts and there are postcards in church to support their campaign. Of course, companies need to make profits to survive - but at what expense? Does love of money come before love of God and neighbour? Do you refuse the invitation to be part of God’s banquet because you’re more interested in profit and making money?

We are reminded of the parable of the sower, especially at Harvest time. How people have different reactions to the invitation to put their faith in God and respond to the word of God. For some the word of God never takes root. For some the word is sown on rocky ground where there is initial reception but then trouble or persecution makes them fall away. For others it is like the seed in thorny ground where the worries of this world and the deceitfulness of wealth choke faith and make it unfruitful. But some seed falls on good soil and produces a crop. (Mark 4.1-20)

Some have been delighted to be included. In the parable they are the poor and disabled. They have come in and celebrated with Jesus.

The second level of meaning for the parable was of course in the context of the day. For Luke the expected guest were the Jews, waiting and waiting for the kingdom of God to come only to find, when it arrived, that they had more pressing things to do. Yet of course in Luke’s day many Jews had become Christians, yet also the gospel was spreading into the Gentile, non-Jewish world and every kind of person from every moral and immoral background was responding to Jesus despite their different cultural, social, ethnic and ethical background.

The third twist is that it returns to the challenge in the first three verses 12-14. The party to which the original guests were invited was Jesus’ kingdom movement. His remarkable welcome for all and sundry. If people wanted to be included in this movement, this is the sort of thing they were joining. So once again the challenge comes to us today. We have to work out in our own churches and families what it would mean to celebrate God’s kingdom so that the people at the bottom of the pile, at the end of the line, would find the gospel to be good news, as much as we do. It isn’t enough to say we ourselves have been dragged from the highways and byways, to our surprise to share in God’s party. That may be true; but party guests are then expected to be party hosts in their turn.

The power of hospitality and welcome is at the heart of the gospel. As part of our refurbishment we have made a study room on the top floor of the Parsonage as well as refurbishing the hall and kitchen. Too often we make the study the most important room in the proverbial house of Christian discipleship. We assume it’s what you know that saves you, its what you believe that shapes you and its what you say that defines you. Faith is what you believe?

The second saying from Luke 17 suggests that *it’s not great faith you need. It is faith in a great God*. Faith is like the window through which you can see something. What matters is not whether the window is six inches or six feet high; what matters is the God your faith is looking out on. What is your vision of God? If it’s the creator God, the God active in Jesus, the God of all the world, the God who works by his Spirit to bring new life and hope to all, then the tiniest little peep hole of a window will give you access to power like you never dreamed of. But humility is needed. You are not God. And you can’t put God in your debt. All genuine service to God is done from gratitude, not to earn anything at all.

Rather than the study being the most important room in the house of Christian discipleship, I think biblically the kitchen table is the most important: it speaks of sharing, service, hospitality and welcome.

Who do we let into our homes and hearts? Who do we share food with regularly? Who is offered a listening ear, sustenance, help, time and hope, with a bit of food and drink thrown in for good measure?

Its surprising how much of Jesus’ most important work and conversations took place around food. His first miracle was at the wedding at Cana. His last meeting with the disciples before the cross was sharing the Passover meal. His first visit to them after the resurrection was to a barbecue on the beach. There is transformational power in hospitality and sharing in a meal. I hope and pray God’s blessing on us as we seek how best to use our newly refurbished facilities for the gospel of hospitality and welcome in the name of Jesus.

May we all respond to the invitation to be part of God’s party: for all are invited.