Set the table!

Coming back from holiday takes some readjusting! There's the jetlag, or time zone difference, very often the temperature difference, getting back into the normal routine, the tyranny of the alarm and leaving behind the things that we might have got used to in being somewhere different. For me on this trip it has been Canadian hospitality. There is something disconcerting about an entire nation being so polite. And as British people there is a tendency to not want to be outdone in being polite. So, a "thank you" gets a "you're welcome." But the problem with us British is that we have to say thank you for everything,

being handed a menu: "thank you," "you're welcome."

Giving the menu back: "thank you," "you're welcome."

Pouring some water: "thank you," "you're so welcome."

Bringing the drinks: "thank you," "don't mention it, you're so very welcome."

In fact, it all gets a bit aggressively polite as if we are ratcheting up the politeness stakes, who will break first? Usually it's me, I stop saying thank you!

Hospitality is as fragile as it is important, how it is given or withheld, received or rejected frames every human encounter we have. As we think about St Aidan this morning and hear the readings we've had for this 11th Sunday after

Trinity, we are reminded that hospitality and humility are essential ingredients for any Christian community.

Luke's Jesus is a feasting Jesus, there are in Luke more references to eating, banquets, tables and reclining at tables than in any other Gospel.[1] "That the table is the principal site for fellowship and discourse for Luke's Jesus should not escape notice.[2] "Meals are Jesus' metaphors for the reign of God, expressive of God's inclusiveness."[3] So, the setting of the parable we've had this morning and the parable itself are very much at home in Luke's portrayal of Jesus, the glutton and drunkard of the Pharisee's accusations. And yet, this is also one of Luke's conflict stories, Jesus has been invited to a meal on the Sabbath to be watched closely. Meals and the Sabbath have been flash points between Jesus and the religious elite throughout the gospels. Jesus consistently turns all their rules on their heads, and he does so again here.

He queers the rules of etiquette by outlining who **not** to invite: friends, relatives, rich neighbours and anyone who can return the favour. The invited

---

[1] Robert J Karris quoted in Rodney Sadler, *Feasting on the Word, Year C Vol 4,* p.21
[2] Sadler, *ibid*
[3] Goss, Robert E, "Luke" in *The Queer Bible Commentary,* p.532

are to be the unwanted: the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind[4] -

exactly those who are excluded.

It's this theme of hospitality that the author of the letter to the Hebrews picks

up on in 13:2. "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing

that some have entertained angels without knowing it." We've travelled with

Hebrews throughout the summer, and we've travelled with Abraham in

Genesis a fair bit too, so perhaps you may hear the echoes of the story of

Abraham entertaining the angels and even God. I think we're supposed to.

The author deliberately sets up the allusion for us. She, because I'm quite fond

of the theory that it's Priscilla, one of Paul's companions, who has written the

letter, brings the letter to a close and focusses in on the need and the

significance of this kind of abundant culture.

The letter to the Hebrews is perhaps one of the densest of its kind in terms of

the theology of who Christ is and, as such, it's enjoyable to know that in

amongst all that doctrine and the swirling use of language and concept,

---

[4] Goss, *ibid*, p.532

ultimately it still all comes down to the practice of hospitality and the table at which we gather around as community.

 "It is almost as if the Preacher had said, "Because Jesus Christ, the firstborn of all time, the heir of all things is the great high priest who offered the perfect and lasting sacrifice and now sits in majesty at the right hand of God, therefore polish the silver and set the table for company."[5]

But Priscilla's idea of hospitality is costly and thoroughly Christ centred. In verse 8 she reminds us that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever. It is another echo, this time of the story of God appearing to Moses in the burning bush revealing the divine name, I Am who I am, or I will be who I will be. It is both a promise, we can have absolute certainty in who God is and will be, and a warning, even if we change God will not. And so, the hospitality that Jesus shows and demands in Luke, is the same hospitality he demands today.

---

[5] Thomas G Long

And here's the shocking thing. If the unwanted are invited to the banquet that Jesus throws and you and I are here as invitees … well then … here is where we encounter the humility that is vital to our hospitality.

If we think we deserve to be here because we're good, or because we have a good pension pot, or because we're something in this community, or even because we happen to be the Vicar and wear nice robes – if we think that, then there's the door. The parable reminds us that we are only here, as everyone is only here, because of God's promiscuous grace, none of us deserve to be here, all of us are welcome here.   And because of that the only hospitality on offer here is Jesus' hospitality. There are no saved seats, there are no second-class citizens, there are no strangers.

Yet culturally, and for good reasons sadly, we are often wary of the stranger – fearful of what their motive may be, or what unsettlement their behaviour may bring. Think of our current political climate, where the stranger is often scapegoated for the flaws and failings of the government – a sacrificial lamb for the slaughter at the cost of community cohesion and trust. And yet the author of Hebrews holds the antidote out to us for our wariness and cynicism.

"Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured." In the immediate context she is talking of fellow Christians, fellow members of their community. In the wider context we are reminded that our hospitality to the stranger begins with identifying with them, as though we are them.

Latest figures estimate that around the world 360 million Christians face persecution, oppression, false imprisonment and torture. What is our hospitality to them in our thoughts, our prayers, how we lobby government?

Approximately 18,000 children have been killed in Gaza. In 2021 the under 18 population of Berwick was 2,208. That's the entire under 18 population being killed 9 times over. What is our hospitality to them, to those who survive, to the 1 in 3 children who are acutely malnourished? How do we pray, think, talk, respond, how can we show that we can be Anti-Zionist without being Anti-Semitic?

There are approximately 27 million refugees across the world, just over 109k claimed asylum in the UK last year. The asylum system costs us £5.4 billion per year approximately; tax avoidance is estimated at £36 billion. Where is

our hospitality if we don't challenge the rhetoric of small boats, of stolen jobs, of an island of strangers? Where is our hospitality when the poorest are targeted and the billionaires let off?

Humility comes from the word humus, literally meaning 'of the earth'. It reminds us that we are all of the earth, all dust, all ashes, all temporary. And yet all equally loved by God, all invited to the banquet of the outsiders. Our hospitality starts with our doors being open every day, to those who walk through those doors, whose stories intertwine with ours however briefly and unnoticed. It continues in our welcome and how we notice each other and those who might be visiting or new. It expands in the work we do in our schools, in our community. It has to impact the way we give our money, not just as individuals but as a church, you don't just give this parish money to pay the gas bills or keep the lights on but to show hospitality. It is demonstrated in how we make people feel at home and comfortable physically in this building and that has to be something we give our attention to. Hospitality is the foundation of who we need to be.

In chapter 5 of the Third Book of his History of the English Church and People, the Venerable Bede tells us about St Aidan. We are told that King

Oswald asks for a Bishop to come and teach the faith, and he gets a man of "austere disposition." When the mission fails and he returns to tell the sorry tale, Aidan comments "Brother, it seems to me that you were too severe on your ignorant hearers." For his clarity he gets the job … and succeeds. Bede makes much of Aidan's humility and hospitality, he walked rather than rode, he ransomed slaves, he ate sparingly but fed the hungry and the poor, he stopped to talk to whoever he met on his journeys. Hospitality is not about doing to others, it is about being with others, in the recognition that each of us is made in the image of God.

The influence of St Aidan is all around us, we have him in the Millenium window here. The call of Jesus' hospitality is always sounding, the call to humility is our constant battle. Summer is drawing to a close, I'm entering my sixth month of being in post. We've taken some time. In the first episode of my favourite TV series, The West Wing, the President comes back from a break to a staff that haven't fully had their minds on the job. In amongst all the bickering, lack of attention and infighting President Bartlet reads them a naval intelligence briefing of over a thousand Cuban refugees rescued, many had died, those who were left were hungry and thirsty, and claiming asylum. "My point is this," Bartlet says, "break's over." My friends, my point is this, break's

over, polish the candlesticks, set the table, re-arrange the furniture – we have

guests coming.