

TFTD 25.19 Wednesday March 26th

A Foretaste of the Heavenly Banquet: Luke 14

“When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honour, he told them a parable. ⁸ ‘When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honour, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; ⁹ and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, “Give this person your place”, and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. ¹⁰ But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, “Friend, move up higher”; then you will be honoured in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. ¹¹ For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.’ Luke 14: 7-11

When I was growing up, our dining room was dominated by a huge table my mother had bought from a monastery. You could just about squeeze sixteen people around that table. Nearly every week, a large gathering of people would be invited to sit around it for a meal. We lived in France, so good food and wine were important, but in our household, it was far more about having good conversations and fun. The seating plan was simple. The adults and guests of honour were at the top of the table while we children and young people would squeeze up at the bottom.

My mother knew what it was like to be an outsider and live in a country that was not her own. She knew what it was like to feel isolated and alone, to be judged for being different, for being not quite one of us, for not quite belonging. To make up for what she had experienced, there was always a welcome in our home for refugees, ex-pats and gap-year students. If you turned up at the doorstep around mealtimes, you would always be invited in to share with us whatever was on the table. I am unaware that we ever entertained angels, but a few of those who sat with us at the bottom of the table did go on to become influential leaders.

Generous hospitality was only part of the story. My mother had an ulterior motive. She believed that exposing us children to a wider range of people would broaden our horizons, teach us tolerance and instruct us in the art of good conversation. Learning the art of good conversation is hard work, especially for those who prefer to sit in the background absorbing everything going on. Pivotal to the art of good conversation is the art of asking a great question. Being asked a great question does not embarrass or silence you. On the contrary, a great question invites you into the heart of a discussion, it ushers you to a place of honour around the debating table. A great question can release in you fresh energy and unlock truths within yourself which have been previously hidden. Being asked a great question can be truly transformational.

Jesus spent much of this ministry engaging with people around a dinner table, teaching and asking questions. The child in me likes to believe that Christ would have been quite a home squashed with us at the bottom of the table before being reluctantly invited to join the adults at the top of the table.

Today, our passage from the Gospel of Luke 14: 7-24 mostly encourages us to reflect on radical hospitality. Radical hospitality is about extending genuine, unconditional welcome and acceptance to others, especially those who are marginalised or different. It is about going beyond politeness to create a truly inclusive and equitable space.

It is important learning but I have been thinking about radical hospitality in a new light this Lent. “When Jesus noticed how the guests chose the places of honour, he told them a parable”. Those words made me think about how we expend much energy, asserting our place in a group situation. Typically, we direct that energy towards ensuring our point of view gets heard, our agenda embraced, and our ideas adopted. I have been wondering if there is another way of being. I wonder what radical hospitality means in that context. I have wondered what “going and sitting in the lowest place” looks like.

Over the years, I have worked with some amazing leaders. Some were very charismatic, some had breath-taking energy, and some had a mind-

blowing vision. Yet the best had one thing in common: they transformed group dynamics. They would put their energies into understanding the unique contribution that each member brought to the table. They would use that knowledge to bring out the best in those around them and create opportunities for everyone to shine. They would consider their exaltation as seeing a group thrive in whatever task it had set itself.

And yes, along the way, they had mastered the art of asking a great question.

We are called to be a community of faith. As a community of faith, we are the body of Christ. The body of Christ is not a hierarchy. It is counter-intuitive, a truly inclusive and equitable space. It's a collection of different unique components that somehow work best when radical hospitality is extended by all to all its members.

If this passage of scripture is a call to humility, as many commentators suggest, then for me, it is less about self-effacement and far more about acknowledging how many times I fail to live by God's standards.

Yet, in it, too, is a glimmer, a foretaste of the heavenly banquet to which we are all invited (of course!).

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