



Revd Ro's Reflection on The 11th Sunday after Trinity Proper 17 Year C

Luke 14.1, 7-14

Hebrews 13.1-8, 15-16

Our gospel reading for this morning begins at the start of chapter 14 but then misses a few verses. I think that is a shame because they link with the account we read last week of the woman who was crippled so I am going to begin by looking at them. It is always ominous when we read words such as these,

^{14.1} 'On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the Sabbath, they were watching him closely.'

The setting is a meal; I wonder how many times in the gospels we see Jesus at a meal culminating of course with the Last Supper which we remember in our Eucharist. I love the words; 'Do this as oft as ye shall drink it in remembrance of me.' Wouldn't it be nice if at each meal we did remember Jesus? We think too of how those followers of Jesus recognised him as he broke the bread at the supper at Emmaus. So here we are witnessing a meal. There is a Eucharistic prayer which has these words, 'On the night before he was betrayed Jesus sat at supper with his friends.' Well, Jesus was most certainly not with his friends at this meal. He has gone on the Jewish Sabbath as a guest of a leader of the Pharisees. Was this the snake pit that a usual gathering of Pharisees was for Jesus? Certainly they were 'watching him closely' and one doesn't get the impression this was with respect and awe for the young rabbi. No doubt they were waiting for him to make a wrong move. Not that that worries Jesus one iota.

Once again on this Sabbath Jesus is confronted by human suffering, this time in the form of the man with dropsy. We remember how the synagogue leader had complained after Jesus had cured the woman and told people to come to be cured on another day of the week. Jesus' reaction then was to say, 'You hypocrites.' This incident is almost identical but this time Jesus addresses the Pharisees before the healing.

² 'Just then, in front of him, there was a man who had dropsy. ³And Jesus asked the lawyers and Pharisees, 'Is it lawful to cure people on the Sabbath, or not?' ⁴ But they were silent.'

Just why were they silent? Were they afraid Jesus would show them up as hypocrites or was no one prepared to stick their neck out and confront him? Jesus turns from them and his eyes meet those of the man with dropsy.

‘So Jesus took him and healed him, and sent him away.’⁵ Then he said to them, ‘If one of you has a child or an ox that has fallen into a well, will you not immediately pull it out on a Sabbath day?’⁶ And they could not reply to this.’

Jesus heals the man, saves him and sends him on his way, his life restored to him. Then he turns back to them and his argument is almost the same as the one he used to the synagogue leader and his cronies. If your child or your animals need help or their life needs saving on the Sabbath are you going to stand there and watch them die because no ‘work’ must be done on the Sabbath? Of course not, God is a God of love and his word is life giving. They can’t reply to him because of course they take care of their animals and children’s needs on the Sabbath. Jesus has literally tied their hands.

It reminds me of a story which is told of St. Aidan. Oswald the King gave him a fine horse with an equally fine harness so that he could go around the countryside more easily on his missionary journeys. Aidan, it is said, gave it to a beggar and when the king found out he was angry that such a precious gift had been thrown away. Aidan’s words were simple, ‘Do you care more for that son of a mare than this son of God?’ Well there is no answer to that! Jesus is basically saying the same; do you care more about the letter of the law than the suffering of fellow human beings? I can restore their health and their life and that is the most wonderful gift anyone can receive. The Sabbath is God’s holy day and I am restoring the life of a child of God. Nothing must stand in the way of that. Besides Jesus does nothing in his own strength but through God’s power so he is showing the power of God in these actions. It is God who heals.

So now the preparation for the meal goes on,

⁷ ‘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,’ It might sound more like a parable if it said, ‘A man was invited to a wedding banquet and he went and sat in the place of honour.’ I did a wedding yesterday and it was a very joyful service indeed. I knew the couple and the family and the love in the service was tangible. Afterwards they all went to the meal and of course places would be reserved for the wedding party and maybe the tables all had place cards. Well now just imagine one of the guests walking in and sitting in the chair of the best man! The result would be shock and the result would be that guest would have to sit elsewhere. Very embarrassing! When I was at university we had to sit at ‘High Table’ with the tutors a couple of times a year. I can just imagine the look of consternation had I walked up and plonked myself in the Dean’s chair! Illustrations like this make the story more real. In Jesus’ day the places at which the guests sat were important and prescribed. Jesus tells them not to show their pride by thinking they are the most important.

‘...Do not sit down at the place of honour, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; ⁹and 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.’

Here my examples don’t really hold true because we usually take the place allotted to us.

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.’

In Jesus' day this would be exactly what would have happened. Jesus is not just talking about dinner parties though. When he tells a parable there is always more than one meaning. A parable is an illustration and the last lines cut to the heart of the matter.

¹¹ 'For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.' Here we have a group of Pharisees, a leading religious sect, they obey the law to the letter, and they make it their study. They have it right with God, or so they think. They look down on others, the poor, the sick, and the oppressed, the disabled. The Pharisees and their ilk consider themselves as a superior class. More important to God, they would say than these others. Well Jesus is here to tell them they have it totally wrong. In God's eyes there is simply no such thing as status. All are equal and all are loved by him. The central question is who will turn to Jesus, who will listen to his life-giving words, who will join him in the heavenly banquet in God's newly created order? Think of these words from Isaiah, these are the people Jesus talks of because he has come to bring freedom for humanity and just look at those who are mentioned.

¹ 'The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
² to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour,' (Isaiah 61)

Jesus reads this to them in the synagogue in Nazareth and says now in your hearing this has come true. Jesus is the Messiah; Jesus is the second person of the Trinity, Jesus is the co-creator of all that is. Yet Jesus was born in poverty, was a refugee and never owned property. The king of kings kneels and washes the feet of twelve poor men. The core of his message is humility, care and service to one another.

It is wrong to exalt yourself, to think yourself better than other people; it is not God's way. Of course there has to be organisation, of course people are leaders but it takes a great deal of skill and humility to be the sort of leader Jesus requires. Being a leader does not make us better than other people, leaders have a great responsibility of trust and their aim should be to help the people they guide. Power is a difficult thing though, and it can so easily be abused. In this passage Jesus is warning against it. Care for one another, love one another is Jesus' message. Can you imagine how radical these words would be to the Pharisees? The established order, the accepted way is turned on its head. That is the message of Jesus, it is no longer the way of the world, it is the way of God, and kingdom values must replace worldly values.

¹² 'He said also to the one who had invited him, 'When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbours, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. ¹³But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. ¹⁴And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.'

Jesus is calling us all to God's wedding banquet. We are all guests equally loved and we are all invited, the question is will we accept, and if we do Jesus' commission is to live in God's way. So many of the Jews did not listen to him, it was the hierarchy who engineered his death. They rejected

the Messiah. So many times however is it the outcast, the poor, the women, the sick and the needy who turn to him and have their lives changed forever by him. Jesus offers eternal life but a person has to accept it and turn to God, to tune their life to his way.

This links in with our reading from Hebrews. Chapter 13 is the last chapter of the letter. When anyone is writing to an audience, especially when they have something important to say, the last part of their writing or indeed speech is of great importance. It is the final thing his audience will be left with. The argument and teaching will be crystallised in the final paragraphs so it is here.

^{13.1} 'Let mutual love continue. ² Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.'

Here the writer emphasises the words of Jesus himself when he gives his new commandment, 'Love one another as I have loved you.' This, says the writer, is not something airy or vague, it is an instruction to be lived out day by day, it is a guide for life. So they must show mutual love within the church family but that extends to all people, show hospitality to all.

We remember Jesus' words from Matthew 25

"...Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink,... ⁴⁵"Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

This was taken very seriously, think of the monastery where it was part of the Rule that hospitality was central and no one in need must be turned away. The Spirit of Jesus is within each one of us and what we do to our brothers or sisters we do to him. It is a huge responsibility and the writer of Hebrews reminds these early Christians of this. We remember that the writer is addressing a persecuted community and is talking about things that regularly happened, that were horribly real.

³ '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.'

These people are suffering for their faith; they are being persecuted as Jesus was before them. They must always keep that in mind and pray for those who suffer. It is not simply a fact that someone has been arrested, it affects them all. John Donne expresses this when he says, 'No man is an island.' Each person in their community is part of the body of Christ and if one suffers all suffers with them. This is the unity of the church, or it should be. This is mutual love and caring. It doesn't have to be simply the church either. We should feel the same for families and communities, indeed whole countries who suffer. Think of the outpouring of care when Ukraine was invaded. People tried to do what they could to help. It is important to empathise and turn that empathy into practical help if you can.

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There now follows advice for day to day living in the way of Christ, this is advice about morality and day to day behaviour.

⁴ 'Let marriage be held in honour by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers. ⁵Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have;'

Really the writer is asking, what is your motivation in life? Is it Christ centred or self-centred? I come back again to yesterday's wedding; the service speaks of love and its expression in the 'delight and tenderness of sexual union.' This love is a God given gift and is central to a loving relationship. A marriage is a covenant; promises of love and loyalty are made by the couple to one another. Faithfulness in their relationship is central. But the warning in this passage is that everything is open to abuse. If desire is given free rein then the result is sexual misconduct and can lead to the abuse of others and the destruction of relationships. It is not acceptable Christian behaviour. The love of money also motivates people. There is nothing wrong with money, we all need it, the love of it is something else again. When we love something it becomes the driving force in our lives. In other words it can replace our love of God and mar our relationship with others. Our attitude to money is as open to abuse as anything else and as we see so often it can possess a person and finally destroy lives. We cannot call ourselves Christian then simply do what we like. Living in the way Jesus taught is vital. That means in our relationships with people compassion and care is central and our gospel reading illustrated this. The Pharisees care only for the letter of the law; Jesus cares about people's welfare.

The writer finishes with the promise of Jesus, ⁵ '...I will never leave you or forsake you.'

⁶So we can say with confidence, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?'

What wonderful words these are and indeed what a wonderful promise. Remember Jesus' words at the Ascension. 'I am with you always, to the end of the age.' Jesus is always with us as close as our own breathing. The Holy Spirit strengthens and comforts us. These people could not have faced persecution without that Spirit of God. That is true throughout history. I wonder just how many times Jesus said. 'Do not be afraid.' He said it to the disciples in the upper room, to Mary Magdalene and to his followers, 'Do not be afraid little flock.' We should always remember those words of Jesus. This is what the writer of Hebrews wants to leave his readers with, these words of love and the promise of Jesus.

⁷ 'Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. ⁸Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever.'

The writer appeals to these Christians to remember their leaders, the great missionary leaders like Paul, Timothy and the apostles, but also the leaders in their own communities. Those people who passed the word of Jesus to them who brought the life changing good news. Those leaders who lived the Christ life have the huge responsibility of carrying forward the work of Jesus. The people must respect and pray for them. Likewise, leaders today must deserve respect. They must guide and care for the church putting the needs of others before their own. These are the shepherds of the flock. Think back to our gospel passage. This is not about status or power it is about loving the people and putting their needs first, to lead is to serve.

The writer ends his epistle with his main focus Jesus Christ,

¹⁵ 'Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. ¹⁶Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.'

Remember Temple sacrifice is still happening, that would not stop until the Temple was destroyed in AD 70. The Christians have turned away from that old way to the new way of Christ, their sacrifice is what is acceptable to God. Not the blood of calves or bulls. No that's over; Jesus gave his blood on Calvary, his was the final offering. His blood is the blood of the new covenant, a covenant of love.

Just as a wedding is a covenant of love between the couple. Jesus gave his life in love to set us free from sin and death. Now then we owe him our love and a 'sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name.' The 'sacrifice' here is to turn to God, worship him and live in Jesus' way, to do good works and care for people and not feel superior to them.

I usually finish with a quotation. This is at the end of Hebrews and it is used as a blessing especially in the Easter season.

²⁰Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, ²¹make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will, working among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory for ever and ever. Amen. (Hebrews 13)

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