

Sunday 1st September 2019
Trinity 11 (C)

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Ecclesiasticus 10.12-18

NT: Hebrews 13.1-8,15-16

G: Luke 14.1,7-14

“Pride was not created for human beings”, from our Old Testament reading this morning.

Not a good advice for someone like me who likes to maintain the humility of medieval cardinals! But, to switch from talking about me, let me begin by giving you what this sermon is NOT about. It's very tempting when we hear the Gospel reading today to use it as a way of thinking about the Church including strangers. The Church proves to be adaptable in various contexts. It always changes as to be a place of welcome for others, the unfamiliar other. This is not necessarily a bad thought; but I suspect that it's not quite what the Gospel is about. There is something more central here about our faith.

‘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’, says Jesus. Jesus does not seem to deny that there is a place for those who may be considered ‘more distinguished’ and he does not make a judgment on their worth as such. The emphasis is not on the invitation being extended to ‘bad’ and ‘good’ alike; the emphasis is on helplessness, those who expect nothing. Hence, our Gospel reading today ends with Jesus’ advice not to ask to dinner those who can be relied on to return your hospitality. What is being challenged here is not the worth of any particular human being, be they rich or poor, but it is more the pattern of calculating human worth that is based on the condition of exchanging benefits: This or that person is worth taking more seriously because of their status, or their virtue, for instance.

Jesus is suggesting that God's reality, or you might say God's transcendence, is to be found with those who can't speak for themselves, the left overs. This is not because they are more virtuous. It's because God always appears in what WE miss out. We can't contain him in this or that group. And we always have people in our midst who are missed out. This is the nature of things. We are unavoidably bound to exclusion when we form our social and moral life. So, the exhortation in the letter to the Hebrews is seriously telling us: 'Do not neglect to show hospitality to stranger, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it'.

So why are we encouraged to pay attention to the stranger? Why is the Gospel telling us to remember those who are missed out? It's certainly not telling us anything about them being right or wrong. If we thought that God is to be found with the outsider alone, we would be making the same mistake that we are being encouraged to abandon. There is no suggestion that there is something more superior about the outsider. The woman found accused of adultery really is a sinner; Zacchaeus was really an insatiable tax collector. Their acts do not align with God's character. This is also the irony of rebellion movements generally, everyone claims to be more righteous than everyone else. But, we sometimes forget that a counterculture is no less a *culture*, with its own problems and systems.

So why is this outsider still important? Perhaps because the outsider whose place I cannot guarantee, whose health I cannot secure, whose education I cannot provide, is the one who will always be a reminder of my *own limits*. 'Pride', says our OT reading 'was not created for human beings'. The outsider reminds me that I am, like the outsider, just as in need of God; the letter to the Hebrews puts it like this again: 'Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you were being tortured'. Here lies the difficulty of our Gospel. It tells us that you can't win grace simply by claiming to be 'good'. At the same time, it doesn't suggest either that the grace of

God has no consequences to your life, or your lifestyle. We get quite straight forward advice in the letter to the Hebrews in this regard. God is found in that missed connection that we habitually can never capture.

So, we can neither claim moral superiority nor think of God as sweeping aside all issues of ethics to affirm us. Both the conservative legalist as well as the wishy-washy libertine will have difficulty with this Gospel. The Gospel is asking us: 'Do you need the grace of God in Jesus Christ?' Do you acknowledge your limits? Are you hungry for Christ? Because if we are not hungry, if we think we are alright on our own, then we can go, we can leave this place. We don't need to be here. This morning, however, we are here because we don't have the nerve to leave. We can't face Jesus, the *outsider*, and say, we have no need of you! We do as individuals and as a Church tell all sorts of lies about ourselves, but this one we have not yet managed to tell. We are here because we need to be fed. If we all acknowledge that at least, we will find two things: first, we will find as the letter to the Hebrews puts it that Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today and forever. The faithfulness of God remains always available, anchored in Christ regardless of our faithlessness. Second, we will find that we all have more in common even when we didn't think we did.

In a society that is deeply divided at present with all the political crises we face, what is needed is not a revolution, as some hastily suggest. What is needed is for the Body of Christ to be alive and feeding others. As we gather to be fed here at the altar, we proclaim to the world around us that God's purpose is for us to live for each other. God help us if we turn away from this call. We care about this because we are the Body of Christ and the world needs the Body of Christ. The world is hungry for truth, just as we are hungry. We are here to be fed with that truth in the Body and Blood of the Sacrament. We do not stand with Pride as if we have no need for God and for grace.

May the offering gift of Jesus, the *Outsider*, be the motive power for all that we do here in this place in this city and in our protest against division. We have an appetite to receive, to eat the bread of life. This is what makes us truly human with and for each other. This is what *is* made for human beings.....

“Pride was not created for human beings”.

Fr Yazid Said