

Trinity XI – The radical welcome of God's table fellowship

Ecclesiasticus 10.12-18

Hebrews 13.1-8,15,16

Luke 14.1,7-14

This was no ordinary banquet, no ordinary conversation. A group of us had travelled from Cambridge to the Category A high-security prison at Whitemoor in the fens. We were there for the graduation ceremony of students from both Cambridge University and Whitemoor prison who had met together at the prison to undertake a course in philosophy and ethics. Over the duration of the course, what began as two very disparate groups, each wary of the other, had grown closer in the shared pursuit of some of philosophy's most basic questions. And now at the end we had come together to celebrate this achievement over a meal. Most of the banquet had been organised by the prisoners themselves. As we sat down to eat, met each other's families and talked and laughed over insights gained from the course, a palpable sense of our common humanity shone out. It seemed to escape the boundaries of the prison walls and human violence and touch something divine. Was this a glimpse of that great banquet to which God calls us?

In our Gospel today, we find Jesus doing something he often does. He sits down at a table with others over a meal to share fellowship and teach. Today he does not hold back. Jesus tells the company of religious figures, just as he tells us, that we should not invite our

friends or relatives to a banquet in the expectation they will invite us back. Rather, we should invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind. The Letter to the Hebrews extends this to the stranger, the prisoner, those who are tortured. In short, we should invite the outcast and downtrodden. It is hard not to feel one's conscience pricked. How often do we continue with our wining and dining but forget those on the margins? Yet we must not treat Jesus' words as crude moralism. He is not simply trying to make us feel guilty to force us to look after the poor. This risks making those in need mere objects of our charity where we do good not for their sake but to make us feel better. To treat Jesus' words in such a moralistic fashion fails to take seriously the radical nature of the table fellowship to which he calls us. Indeed, it fails to understand how radical sharing a meal and conversation with others can really be.

Somewhat ironically and tragically, despite being more connected to more people than at any time in history, we can easily lose the art of meeting others face-to-face, of making space and time for a meal and talk where we encounter each other more fully and search out a deeper truthfulness and joy. But occasionally, just as we experienced in Whitemoor prison, we are reminded of this profound joy after a meal where conversation flows and a sense of mutuality blossoms.

The transformative potential of such table talk has been recognised throughout different cultures. It was prized in ancient Greece for

promoting a context where philosophical discussion could happen. This would take place after the main meal over drinks in what were called symposia. Literally sharing a drink together. Perhaps the most famous account is Plato's Symposium where a host of individuals including Socrates and Aristophanes discuss the meaning of love. These symposia sought to bring about a greater understanding by fostering friendship between participants. In this setting, genuine philosophical enquiry could flourish. This is philosophy understood as the search for wisdom. It can be contrasted to a philosophy that claims already to have all the answers or to a philosophy, particularly prevalent in our age, that claims it is impossible to know anything. Both amount to positions unwilling to learn anything new from others. Instead, a genuine searching after wisdom keeps on delighting in discovering more together with others. It amounts to the love of wisdom for its own sake which is the true meaning of philosophy and the beginning and content of the life of faith. This ancient Greek tradition understood the significance of a shared meal to forging friendships crucial to this enterprise, and how such table fellowship opens us to encounter reality itself.

It is against the background of the Greek symposium that commentators interpret our Gospel passage today. Jesus, wisdom and love incarnate, is seated around the table with a group of Pharisees. The atmosphere is, however, far removed from the Platonic ideal of

seeking out wisdom with friends. The Pharisees watch Jesus, poised to oppose him. In response, Jesus is deeply critical of the way such gatherings fail to foster true friendship and wisdom and become obsessed with questions of worldly honour and who sits next to whom. Jesus uses this, however, as segue into the radical perspective of the Gospel. True honour comes not to those who seek to exalt themselves to the best place but to the humble. Humility is a deeply Christian and Jewish virtue unknown to the Greeks and sidelined in our culture. Humility means an openness to God and to others in a genuine celebration of their value. Indeed, it is humility that allows genuine table fellowship to flourish and deeper friendships to form. It is like the choicest wine that helps communion grow.

Humility lies at the heart of the radical vision of table fellowship that Jesus calls us to. For it is not simply that the poor and outcast should be invited to the table so that we can help them. Rather, they are invited because of their worth as human beings made for love, friendship, and a wisdom that delights in the beauty of the world. The transformative truth that the ancient Greek philosophers discovered in sharing a meal is only fully expressed when extended to all others, especially to those who are marginalised. This articulates the humbling truth that profound communion between human beings is only possible because God invites all people to share in the table fellowship that is the very life of God. Here is a banquet at which there

are no rich and powerful to invite the poor. All are simultaneously poor and rich because equally invited by God. This is the Eucharistic feast at the heart of our faith to which all are welcome.

And yet, at God's banquet it is the poor and the humble that are given pride of place. It is them that God first calls friends. They have gained a friend's confidence in God's wisdom and faithfulness. To these humble ones belongs the kingdom of God; to them is given the privilege of extending God's invitation. Here the radical nature of Jesus' table fellowship makes a dramatic reversal. For now it is the so-called poor, weak and excluded who invite the so-called rich and strong to God's banquet, a feast thrown for the whole of creation. With this invitation those who exalt themselves will indeed be humbled and yet they will rejoice.

This was certainly the case one afternoon in a prison near Cambridge where prisoners, university students and prison guards saw wisdom shine out in a feast celebrating each person's dignity, a dignity greater than the worst thing anyone had done, a dignity that sang of justice and mercy. As we welcome Lucy and Aiko today, and bid farewell to Fr Dan, let us renew our commitment to be a community that extends God's invitation to all people in a fellowship of love that seeks after wisdom. Let us be a community that knows the love of wisdom is best shared face-to-face, heart-to-heart, over a meal whose sense of welcome spills over and transforms every aspect of life. Amen.