

Trinity 14 Faithfulness and table fellowship

The summer is a good time to pause and think – before the autumn gets under way and the tasks that go with it catch up with us. And today I find myself reflecting on the meaning of faithfulness – faithfulness to the call of Christ in the varied settings of our lives – as this arises in the context of our readings.

In our gospel, we have an example of the antithesis of true faithfulness in the behaviour of a group of people gathering at the house of a leader of the Pharisees at which Jesus is a guest. Because of the subliminal Christian tendency to equate ‘Pharisee and associates’ with ‘bad people’, we need to be careful before demonising or condemning either the leader of the Pharisees or the other guests in this story. They are, in all probability, people with whom Jesus spent time as fellow lay leaders of the people. But more to the point, in Luke Ch 13, (the previous chapter), when Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, teaching about the sharpness of the kingdom of God – we note that in verse 31 “some Pharisees came and said to Jesus, ‘get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you’”. This tells us very simply, but clearly, that the Pharisees have Jesus’ best interests at heart. He may be outspoken, but he’s one of them, and they are attempting to cover his back. So when we get to the story of the meal together, we should think of Jesus in friendly company, but doing his usual thing of stirring the pot.

The first thing Jesus notices is “how the guests choose the places of honour”. As a result, he tells a parable about the potential embarrassment to anyone who takes a high seat only to have to give it up and be relegated to a lower seat. This demonstrates the folly of thinking too well of yourself; “for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” The striking point is made that the purpose and benefits of eating together may be lost if social hierarchy is allowed to become an issue. While the assembled company is digesting

Jesus' fairly cutting and socially awkward observation, he takes aside the leader of the Pharisees and instructs him in how to have another kind of luncheon party – not one at which people will be bothered about who they think they are and therefore where they should sit, but one where everyone will be so pleased to have been asked that they will simply enjoy whatever's on offer. For this kind of meal, one invites not one's friends, brothers, relatives and rich neighbours but the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind! And even though you won't get repaid in any material way, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous, says Jesus.

There is a strong implication here, and it is one we are very familiar with from Jesus, that our sense of who we are, and who we belong *to* and who we belong *with*, and who belongs to us, needs to be fashioned from an understanding of human being and human value that derives from the values of the kingdom of God, and not the lesser instincts of flawed human social protocols. There is a message here for all of us, and to ourselves as a corporate community, about how faithful we are to this calling to discover the meaning of true humanity by sharing our lives and our tables not only within the confines of our given social circles, but more widely. Because the implication is that there's a world of hospitality and humanity out there, waiting for us, that is wider, deeper and more satisfying than we might have yet experienced. This is surely why we attempt to extend our horizons of hospitality all the time as a church, whether to our partner churches here at St George's, to the wider community at St George's Day, to Calthorpe for the Christmas lights switch on, to Bosnian Muslims over the Srebrenica Remembrance, to our schools and so on. What we have to be always careful of, is that our horizons shouldn't narrow or retreat, such that we inadvertently end up only serving ourselves – (or the narrow interests of others). Then, the scripture suggests, we are likely to run the risk of becoming overtaken by internal struggles and hierarchies that spoil the party and diminish the guests. It is interesting that the next section in Luke Ch 14 is Jesus telling the famous story of the great banquet. The matter of outwardly-turned

hospitality is sufficiently important that another story is enlisted to drive the point home. This time it's about invited guests who can't come as they have other fish to fry – land to buy, livestock to go and see and weddings to attend – so the host invites everyone from the lanes and streets. This parable underlines the contrast between a narrow and a generous take on hospitality. In so far as we recognise ourselves in all these stories, we know how easy it is to default to the known, the familiar and the predictable. And yet we know too about the competitiveness and ungraciousness that can go with it. The kingdom of God is an alternative offer, awaiting our attention! This point is well made in verse 2 of our second reading from the letter to the Hebrews; “do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing.”

In the Hebrews reading, there are additional exhortations to faithful living. In addition to showing hospitality, there is the call to let mutual love continue, for prisoners and those being abused to be remembered “as if it was happening to you”. This is a call to empathy and prayer that is more than mere sentiment, leaving us with an interesting question as to how this works in practice. There is also a call to honour marriage and the sanctity of close intimacy; also to live lives free of the love of money. It is hard to see how this little cluster of ethical exhortations comes together – except as a consequence of what may have been going on in the original community being addressed. But it gives us food for thought as to what constitutes faithful living for us too....

What this reading also does is to turn us towards the spiritual roots of faithfulness, namely *dependence on God*. In respect of the call to live faithfully in the ways outlined, the writer wants each one to be able to “say with confidence, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?’” This Godward perspective – that the Lord is the true resource and power in life – is the key, it seems to say, to spiritual freedom. It can prevent us from falling back into self-centred, unfulfilled living. This is expressed by the writer as a ‘sacrifice of praise to God’ – “Let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise

to God, the fruit of lips that confess his name”. Yet the worship to be offered is not to be limited to worship with the lips, in song and prayer and praise, but in action – in not neglecting “to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God”. A true Godward perspective leads us into a response to God and neighbour that is a totality. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.” (Luke 10 v.27).

In considering the call to live faithfully, our passage from Jeremiah illustrates very well how easily we can lose our way. As the prophet inveighs on God’s behalf about the way the people did wrong, and “went far from me”, he makes the observation that they “went after worthless things and became worthless themselves”. This is a wonderful summary I think of how our choices affect us. We become the choices we make. This can of course have very good consequences in our lives – for our best choices can bring deep and lasting benefits. Here, however, the prophet is interested in the lesser choices we make, not the beneficial ones. At the end of the passage a further point is made about the connection between our choices and their consequences: speaking for God, he says, “my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water;” thus, to turn away from the source of our inner strength and nourishment – from the God who loves sustains and empowers us – is to dig a pit for ourselves, one where there is no room for living water.

Let us rather say, “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?”

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