

THE PARABLES OF JESUS – THE GREAT BANQUET

→ Over the last few weeks several of us in this Circuit and many other Circuits up and down the Methodist Connexion have been reading the profiles of the ministers who are seeking a new appointment. In those profiles ministers set out to describe their style of ministry, their experience so far and their hopes for their future. As we read we may also get some insight into their family life and their interests and sometimes within the hobbies and interests section of the profile you will get a minister who says that they enjoy socializing or spending times with friends. I don't think though, that I've ever seen a profile where a minister has included parties in their style of ministry!

.....Why is that I wonder, particularly when we read about the ministry of Jesus and we hear the stories that he told like the ones we've heard this evening? As we read about the ministry of Jesus in the gospels we discover that he preached in the synagogue and he liked a bit of open air preaching too. He spent time training up his disciples and other followers and he ate and drank. Perhaps one of the great sayings about Jesus are words we find in Luke 7 v 34 where Luke writes, "The Son of Man came eating and drinking." That's how he came! He got himself invited to dinners a lot and when nobody invited him, then he invited himself around. In fact, in Luke's gospel there are sixteen parties that Jesus either attends or speaks about. And these parties aren't just something that Jesus does in his spare time or to help him unwind. They are a large part of his mission strategy!

.....And here in Luke 14, Jesus is at one of those parties and whilst he's there he has a thing or two to say about parties. He talks about the best kind of seating plan and the best kind of guest list and he finishes off his stories by talking about the greatest feast of all time, which other parties simply give us a flavor of! And as we move through this passage of scripture we begin to see that Jesus has something to say about how we usually throw parties and about how he would throw a party and the contrast is huge. There is much for us to learn!

→ As so often, Jesus is in the home of one of the leading Pharisees and people are watching him. They're keen to trip him up and catch him out and get him into a tight corner. They may even have invited the sick man to the party for the express purpose of tricking Jesus. Jesus heals him and falls foul of those who believe he shouldn't have done such a thing on the Sabbath. But Jesus challenges these people who like the Priest and the Levite in the story of the Good Samaritan this morning, are more concerned about following the letter of the law than they are about helping those in need.

.....But then Jesus turns the tables on them. These people had been there watching him, but all the time Jesus has also been watching them and he has observed the tacky way in which all the guests were trying to worm their way into the best seats. You probably know the kind of thing that goes on – smiles, handshakes, pats on the back, social small talk but all the time people looking out of the corner of their eye for someone more important to talk to, someone that will help them get closer to the host, someone that will get them a better seat. And so whilst on the surface there are lots of pleasant conversations going on, underneath it all people are anxious, competitive and jealous. They aren't really enjoying each other's

company. They're simply trying to work out where everyone fits into the pecking order!

.....You can almost hear the cogs turning in their heads can't you. Well I may not be quite as important as that lot over there, but I'm definitely more important than him over there, so perhaps it's about here that I'm meant to sit, or perhaps I should just assert myself and push in up there! Maybe we wonder what all the fuss is about, but I bet, you like me, at some time in your life have been to a wedding where some aunt or cousin or relative has had their nose put out of joint because they don't think they were sat in the right place in the church or at the wedding reception!

.....And whilst we may not worry about where we sit at a table, are there other places of honour that we strive for? Certain schools or universities for us or for our children? Certain jobs and professions? Certain designer labels? Certain roles in society? Certain achievements? Don't we rank ourselves against one another and hope to be honoured for what we've achieved? Don't we drop things into conversations ever so subtly sometimes to show that we are somebody, because we know somebody or we've been somewhere?

.....We rank ourselves, just like they did in Jesus' day and so Jesus tells the story about the wedding feast and he paints a picture of someone taking the very lowest seat and then having the host come and encourage them to move to a higher place in the presence of all the other guests. Sound familiar? Isn't that exactly what Jesus himself has done? He took the very lowest place amongst us – born in a manger, earning his living in a manual trade, then moving from town to town with no home and no money. He was called a madman by his own family, rejected in his home town, betrayed, arrested, beaten, spat upon, mocked, flogged and killed. He was laid in a borrowed tomb and he tells you and me "Take the lowest place." That's just what he did. He was content to be a nobody in this world, knowing that in the end, his Heavenly Father would give him a place of honour. So there's no point in fighting your way to the top of the table, because that's certainly not where you will find Jesus.

→ So having addressed the seating arrangements, Jesus moves on to talk about the party guest list. And now he isn't just addressing the gathered crowd, but he turns his attention directly to the host and addresses him. That's quite a bold thing to do isn't it? Challenge the very person whose hospitality you're currently enjoying! These stories certainly tell us a lot about Jesus. He may love a party, but he doesn't like this one much. First of all they hadn't cared about the man in their midst who was in need that they should have cared about. Then they do care about the seating arrangements that really didn't matter. And now, according to Jesus, all the wrong people have been invited! According to Jesus this party is just too middle class!

..... This sick chap that was probably only there as a trap for Jesus; that's the kind of guest Jesus thinks should be there. Don't invite all your friends, Jesus says, because they'll just invite you back and that's not what hospitality is really all about. Hospitality is the love of strangers. Hospitality is about opening up homes and tables to those who won't ever be able to pay you back. Hospitality is a distinctly Christian thing. It's about one-way traffic. And when we live like that then we have the

promise of being at the party to end all parties in God's eternal kingdom. That's the life that Jesus holds out to us all and invites us all to be a part of – a life that sees the needs of others, that prefers service to honour, that opens up our homes and our tables. That's life and that's parties the Jesus way.

→ Now Jesus may seem like a bit of a party pooper in this passage but it ends with Jesus telling another parable about a party that he hopes will excite us enough to convince us to change our ways in our earthly parties. In this story the man throwing the party is God the Father. His servant is Jesus and those who are invited first of all refers particularly to the Jews. But the invitations go out and the people who are invited begin to make rather lame excuses. They put land, wealth and family ahead of attending the banquet. And so they miss out and instead the house is filled with the poor and the crippled and the blind and the lame and you can almost hear Jesus saying – “That's my kind of party!”

.....God is so inviting. It is his nature to open wide his arms and throw open the doors of his house and welcome in all who will come. He is determined that his house will be full. We're all invited to eat with him and that's an invitation to a shared life now and to a fantastic party in the future. Many of us here have already accepted that invitation but God also wants us to be involved in the inviting of others so that his house really is full. So that means that we're called to open ourselves and possibly our homes and our tables to our friends and our families but also to those that we might not normally find ourselves sitting alongside. It's amazing how over the years, within the circle of the church, godliness has come to mean being middle class and polite, not rocking the boat and keeping ourselves to ourselves. Jesus was none of those things and did none of those things. To be like Jesus is to say to the world “come” even when the world runs after its fields and its oxen and its wives.

.....Bishop Jack Nicholls who was the Bishop of Sheffield when we were part of that District a few years ago often spoke of the church as being a place that needed “more prayer and more parties!” What is it that stops us having that joyful, open, inviting dimension to our life together? Are we so bound up with being seen to do the right thing that we are blind to the real needs in front of us? Are we so busy fighting our way to the top of the table that we've lost sight of where Jesus is? Are we looking for our reward and our blessing in the here and now rather than taking the long term view?

.....As you read the parables this week, you will I trust, learn much about Jesus, about the way in which he lived and about the way in which he longs for us to live. He certainly knew how to throw a good party and how to enjoy a good party. Let's not miss out on the joy of sharing in that party atmosphere. Let's make that part of our mission strategy as we continue to invite and welcome in all who will come, secure in the knowledge that they will receive a warm welcome from Christ himself just as we have.