

Text: Luke 14:1, 7-14
Sunday 28 August 2022

Loving God, by the power of your Holy Spirit help me to speak and us to hear your living word. On your people pour your power and grant that each one of us may be touched and moved in the way you want us to go. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen

You know, when you think about it,
there is power in arranging seating....

We don't even think about probably,
but even we have been subject to being
shown where we fit in the scheme of things..
by how we are seated....

I think about the dining table
in my Aunt & Uncle's house.
The table I now have in the Vicarage.

I know we always sat in the same positions
every time we sat at that table for dinner,
we had our "spots" where we would sit down
for a meal together.

When I was a kid, there was always the kids table...
and how important I felt when at last
I was able to sit at the main table with my elders...

With our recent wedding in the parish,
I was reminded of the weddings of my brother and cousins,
even my own wedding,
and the deliberations over
where people would sit, and with who,
and how close they would be to the wedding table.

But also remember how I used to feel
when I went to a family wedding and
I'd see who I was sitting with – often strangers....

I wonder is there anything like that in church?
Surely not?

I joke, because I know there is.

I grew up with my uncle and aunt always sitting in the front pew
and my mum and me in the one behind it.

A symbolic in its own way.
And how the air would get very cool
if someone else was in the seat!!

But then the way most churches are arranged
must say something about status...
some up the front,
some down here...

I am told there are studies on something called
“the power seat”....
and where you sit at a table
in a business meeting
says something about how
you are trying to gain advantage.

But then when you think about it...
Even our legends acknowledge the power of a seat.

I used to love the stories of King Arthur
and the Knights of the Round Table.

And the reason they did that was to symbolize equality...
because there was no head of the table.
All had an equal seat and an equal say.

But I suppose no matter how you arrange the seating,
ultimately where you sit matters.

It matters in the way people perceive you
and in the way you act in different environments.

That was certainly the case even in Jesus' time,
Guests invited to someone's home
would want to be invited to sit in the coveted “highest place”
because it was considered a place of honour.

It was the place where others could see
what kind of person you were viewed as in the community.

Jesus lived in a culture that was very attuned to issues of
honour and shame.
It was a culture where social status mattered in everything you did.

Even more than ours,
and they were more blatant about showing you
what they thought your status might be.

Your social status mattered in how you lived your life
either, as Pharisee or a faithful follower of the law-
and therefore
one who would receive much honour in the community

or as someone who had very little or was an outcast
and probably was not even invited to the party-
and therefore had very little honour.

This is why the Pharisees
get so upset over Jesus eating with
tax collectors and sinners - because there is no honour there.
(Dis-honouring)

I suppose we could ask: has much has changed since then?
Is our culture and the way we view honour and social status different?

Perhaps we use different words,
but mean the same thing.

Sure we have a different way of doing things
in our place and time,
but we still have certain rules about what brings honour.

Like....

- Success based on how hard you work is honoured.
- Making something good out of nothing is honoured.
- Perseverance through hardship, resilience- these are honoured.
- Honour goes to those who deserve it, those who work for it.

And we don't see anything wrong
with enjoying the fruits of our labours.

But that need or wanting to move to a higher place of honour?
Is that still there?
I think so – perhaps we are not as blatant as 1st Century Palestine.

But Jesus saw honour differently.

He saw the way honour was achieved in his culture
and he wanted changed it.

Jesus is at a dinner party and sees what was going on around him

and tells a parable.

And He says to not sit at the highest place at the table-
the place everyone wants, the place that people struggle for.

Instead he tells people to sit at the lowest place-
the place no one wants, the place that people are shamed by.

Jesus doesn't deny the human need for honour,
he doesn't even begrudge people the feelings
of deserving something for what they have accomplished.

But Jesus is aware of where that human honour is coming from.

He doesn't ask us to pretend to be someone we are not,
ignoring honour.

Instead Jesus asks us to be humble
and respect our relationships with others,
and thereby gaining greater honour in the kingdom of God.
So you see, where you sit still matters.
Where do followers of Jesus sit?

I don't tend to think about the disciples in this reading.
I always see the disciples who were with Jesus that day-
perhaps have been part of the group vying for the highest position.

They probably thought Jesus was strange
for speaking out against honour
when they were eating at the home
of someone important in the community.

But Jesus had something to teach here.

Where Jesus sat mattered and still matters
because in his life and his death,
he always chose the lowest position even though he deserved more.

So what do we see....

- He chose to eat with sinners,
- to heal the lepers,
- to talk with women and to welcome children.

He took his place among the lowest in his society-
even though he was an educated, inspired and faithful man
who could have had so much more honour,
or if you like a better seat!

But that isn't what Jesus was about.

we need to remember,
that Jesus was about telling, and more importantly
showing people what the kingdom of God looked like.

And it didn't look like that feast he was invited to.

In the very first chapter of Luke- (turning upside down)
we hear what God's kingdom looks like in
Mary's song, the Magnificat.

- We hear that God will scatter the proud and bring the powerful down from their thrones.
(getting rid of those seats of human honour).
- God will lift up those in need and fill the hungry with good things.

It seems that God's kingdom is more like
that round table of King Arthur.

Where all become equal in God's eyes,
where everyone has a place to sit.
It seems Jesus is about turning our idea honour upside down.

Perhaps we have forgotten,
perhaps through familiarity, through sheer repetition,
that every Sunday, we are invited to a feast,
what has been called down through the centuries:
"the heavenly banquet, the wedding feast.

Perhaps we have forgotten that it is Jesus' feast, not ours
and that we are as unworthy to gather around his table,
as we might consider others.

And yet we are invited!

Where you sit matters. And in any good banquet
how you arrange the seating matters.

What message do we give by how we have arranged our seating?

Today Jesus invites us to show people a glimpse of God's kingdom.
By taking the lowest seat,
by putting relationships before honour,
and by remembering that all are invited to the feast.

Where you sit does matter.
And in God's kingdom everyone will always have a seat,
and that seat will be a place of honour.