

Sermon 28/08/2022 Luke 14:1, 7-14

My grandchildren must be really fed up with me because whenever they start on the 'I want' stuff, they get told, 'It's not all about you'. Not all about what you want. On one occasion Charlie did counter that with, 'But it is all about you Granny, and I want you to play Lego with me'. Well, I did try.

Aren't we lucky today? A gospel reading that is easy to understand, if not to put into practice. Don't build your self up or you will be humiliated. Be humble in your approach and your true place will be recognised. It all sounds so easy, but as usual both custom and human nature just keep getting in the way. Luckily most wedding feasts now have table plans and names on the places, but with a quick read of any agony aunt column, or just listening out at your next family wedding, you are likely to pick up on some dissatisfaction about who was at the top table and who wasn't.

Equally tricky of course are those occasions when no one wants to go first. There is a whole battery of reasons for holding back. Genuine humility is one, not wanting to look pushy, or to look stupid, not sure what to do, concern for other people's welfare. Whatever the specific reason they are all about our relationship with each other – how we treat other people, and how we expect that they will treat us. I would be surprised if I am the only person here who has fallen into the trap of trying to be helpful when meeting with a friend who I knew had less money than I did at the time. Ah, I thought, if she pays for coffee when we meet, I can pay for lunch. It all went horribly pear shaped – she had a counter argument that involved train fares. And I was forced to remember that we cannot know what is best for other people. Even when we think we do. In my arrogant desire to take control I could have lost a friend.

How we act should not be seen as entirely our call. We need to be influenced by the opinions of others, able to bring an outside view that we ourselves lack. Listening to others is important most conversations leave clues about how relationships should develop. It's not good to be so focused on our own plan that we patronise others by expecting them to share it. What we do and how we do it needs to change with time fresh ideas are so important.

Humility is much more than sitting at the back and being served last.

Coincidentally, while I was thinking about the real meaning of humility there was an article in the Church Times last week in which a doctor described watching the air ambulance approaching a Scottish island at night. The helicopter first appeared as a speck of light, a star, and made him acutely aware of how small we all are in the scheme of things. He paraphrased two verses from Psalm 8:

'What are small humans that any greater force or person might know about them, set in the grandeur of the stars and planets, the sun and the moon?' (1)

I found it a thought provoking read and have included the reference in the version of this going onto the parish website. And there are others who read the Church Times if you want to beg a loan.

We are on the one hand so small, so unimportant, and on the other so precious and necessary. It can be so hard to understand our place in all of this, fully to grasp what matters and what doesn't to us and to others. At the café on Tuesday, someone specifically asked me to help them with a query, not because I am cleverer or more knowledgeable than others, but I think because she knew I would understand her question and provide an answer that made sense to her. And I thought I was there to serve coffee and cake.

In some ways the second part of this morning's Gospel is the more challenging. Surely Jesus would know that an invitation for a meal requires a return invitation? That has been accepted as the norm of polite society for many years. We have common place sayings that reflect it: 'There's no such thing as a free lunch'. The need to invite back is mentioned by both Jane Austen and Anthony Trollope. Try instead. 'Knowing the price of everything but the value of nothing'.

Jesus wanted his listeners to understand that an invitation should not be about the ability or inability to be invited back. Should not have one eye open to future possibilities but should be simply about the present, food and fellowship. Again it is about how we relate to everything else not just to a handful of individuals.

I'll quickly say here that of course there is nothing wrong in being invited to your friends' homes and inviting them back – real friends you will want to meet when and where you can. The point in the gospel is that when we issue an invitation we should disregard whether or not we may have something in return. The value of our invitation is with the person we invite and the pleasure of their company.

This morning's gospel encourages us to be mindful in our relationships with others, to be sensitive to their needs. To not be fooled into thinking that our needs are their needs. We are important to God, to those close to us and who depend on us, but we should not forget that we tiny stars in a gigantic universe with which we continue to interrelate. It's not all about me.

(1) Church Times 19/08/2022 The beyondness of things – James Hardy

<https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2022/19-august/faith/faith-features/the-beyondness-of-things>

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