

CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL – TRINITY 11 2019 CATHEDRAL EUCHARIST 1.09.2019

Are you going out to lunch or perhaps entertaining guests later today? If so, you will be in good company. Jesus often shared a meal or used a meal as the setting for one of his parables.

St. Luke describes many such occasions, from the return of the Prodigal Son to the risen Lord at Emmaus on the first Easter Day. The meal recorded in today's Gospel was not a relaxed occasion for Jesus. He had not been invited because he was good company, though the Pharisee and his circle did want to get to know him better. They were out to test him.

Some of us will have shared that kind of experience as part of the interview process for a job. I remember having to eat meals as part of the selection conference for ordination in the august setting of Farnham Castle. For some the big test at a formal meal comes when confronted by rows of cutlery and a plethora of wine glasses.

I have long had an interest in that learned 19thc prime minister William Ewart Gladstone, and not least the times he spent at Hawarden, his country estate in N Wales, where some of mother's family are buried and

where for a time I was a trustee of the renowned Gladstone Library. From time to time Gladstone would invite his tenants and estate workers to dine at the castle, where the table setting included finger bowls. When one poor chap started to drink from his bowl whilst some of the other guests sniggered, Gladstone, is reported, to have immediately lifted his finger bowl and drank from it. True hospitality demands the desire to put our guests at ease, for as the Letter to the Hebrews reminded us 'we may be entertaining angels unawares'.

Sadly that was not the Pharisee's intention. He was seeking a reason to have Jesus condemned, to put a stop to the challenge He was making to their interpretation of how God related to his people. They may have been watching him but Jesus himself was a great observer of life, of the people he met. He based so much of his teaching in parables on what he observed. One of my former colleagues who had a national reputation for his after dinner speeches with a string of amusing anecdotes..... My late wife had a suspicion that the conversation at our regular senior staff lunches could well be a source of material for his wit. It is a gift to have the ability to use what you see to make a point or joke. Again, those who have tried to draw up a seating plan for a wedding reception will know what a challenge it can be to ensure that great

aunt Flossy is not put out, or the bridegroom's family does not feel placed second best. The only cloud on our wedding was the man who believed he should have been placed at the high table. I guess there was no seating plan for the meal in the Gospel story. It reads as if it was a free for all.

Coming closer to home I imagine our virgers and stewards could tell some unpleasant stories of their encounters with people who feel offended by their seating at some service or event. Jesus is not speaking of favourite seats. I am as guilty as any on that score..... We must learn to be generous if someone takes that seat we should rejoice that they have come to join us in worship. Jesus was addressing the issue of who we think we are. Some people will have assigned seats at a wedding reception or in this cathedral church but that is not a mark of their being better than the rest of us but simply because of their role or office as parents, bishop, dean, lord lieutenant or mayor and with their reserved seat goes their demanding responsibilities.

Our Christian calling puts humility at the heart of how we should regard ourselves and how we should practice our faith. St Paul expressed that wonderfully when he wrote 'Christ Jesus was in the form of God, yet he made no claim to equality with God..... bearing

human likeness... he humbled himself and was obedient, even to the point of death, death on a cross'. Humility is a positive virtue. It is not, like the creepy Uriah Heep in Dickens 'David Copperfield', constantly protesting 'We are so very 'umble'. St. Therese of Lisieux saw humility as the secret of holiness. She wrote 'holiness is not in one exercise or another, it consists in a deposition of the heart which renders us humble and little in hands of God, conscious of our weakness but confident....in his fatherly goodness'. Her words echo those verses from the Letter to the Hebrews from our second reading, where beginning with the command that mutual love continue, the writer gives us a list of how we should live as followers of Jesus Christ. Towards the end, of the list, having dealt with the hot topics of sex and money, the writer urges us to be content with what we have because like St. Therese he is convinced that God in Christ 'will never leave or forsake us'. 'The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid'.

Being humble can become an excuse for not playing our part, for thinking we cannot help, that we are not good enough for moral or practical reasons. But true humility, that grounded in prayer and worship helps us acknowledge our gifts and opportunities and our need to use them.

Life at its best, in families, in local communities or as a nation is achieved when people offer their gifts, seek to make a contribution to that great enterprise which for us Christians culminates in the final vision of unity in the city of God.

Humility, rooted in the deep underlying love of God should enable us to do things we never thought we could, simply because we find the courage to offer. Notice how Jesus having reminded those scrambling for the best seats went on to urge those with the resources to have a care for the needy. That is a challenge to all of us which churches in this city and across the nation try answer, for example, by providing meals for the homeless and by at least one congregation inviting people on their own for dinner on Christmas Day. Jesus reminds us that those who willingly give will be blessed.

In the present crisis which is gripping this nation our members of Parliament would, in humility, do well to bear in mind those with the least as they make their decisions in the coming days.

In a few moments we shall humbly make our offering to God, bread and wine, taken, blessed and broken and then together, without precedence we shall kneel together as a worshipping community to receive our

Lord in Holy Communion. As we do that, humbly seeking His grace for the coming week, let the final words of our reading from Hebrews remind us that as we offer a sacrifice of praise to God, we must also do good, sharing what we have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. We can then with sincerity, pray 'we offer... our souls and bodies to be a living sacrifice.....sent out in the power of your Spirit to live and work to your praise and glory'.