

**Sermon at the Eucharist at Holy Trinity
on Sunday 1 September 2019 at 10 am**

Proverbs chapter 25 verses 6 to 7

Hebrews chapter 13 verses 1 to 8, 15 to 16

Luke chapter 14 verses 1, 7 to 14

May I speak in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Eight years ago I went to a reunion at my Grammar School. In the forty eight years since I had left school this was the first I had attended. The occasion was to celebrate the 450 years since Elizabeth the First had granted the school its Royal Charter and the 50 years since Elizabeth the Second had visited the School to mark that anniversary. All of us who had been at school in 1961 had been invited. There were drinks before lunch and then we all went into the hall. The tables had been laid but there was no seating plan. But eerily there was no chaos. All those who had been prefects, sub prefects, captain of boats, captain of the first eleven at hockey, captain of the first eleven at cricket - all of them made their way to the top table. The social stratification of the 1950s and 1960s was alive and well, and I have to say, made me give a wry smile. Nothing seemed to have changed. I would have loved to have had Jesus there giving us his lesson in table manners. I wouldn't have minded the scenes of embarrassment. In Guildford we may well think that the conventions of Jesus' time were woefully chaotic, and that a table plan would have prevented all the awkward confusion. But at my school that day we apparently didn't need a table plan because the table plan was in our minds.

I would have welcomed the mores of a different culture, both in terms of social relationships and at the deeper level of what they signified spiritually. And that's the point. In social relationships Jesus is turning everything upside down, and urging us not to presume, to be aware of others' worth. Even where there is a great difference in income, education, beauty, achievements, race. Especially where there is a great difference in income, education, beauty, achievements, race.

And it goes even deeper. Jesus has told us to hear this guidance on good table manners as a parable. A parable on our spiritual life, our life with God. Most importantly we are not to manoeuvre to be at the top table with God. For example, we know how careful we all are to follow and observe the rituals approved by the Church. Yet in following our own prescription, our own liturgy, our own way of coming into God's presence, we are not to become prescriptive, not to seek to elevate ourselves above those of other traditions and cultures.

Nor are we to manipulate God. We are not to be like Uriah Heep and his mother 'Umble we are, umble we have been, umble we shall ever be.' There is indeed a risk of interpreting Jesus' parable of dinner table manners as appealing to our base motives, along the lines of: 'we are not to seek the first places at table, not because this sort of self-promotion and pride is wrong, but because there is a more subtle way of being honoured.'

But Jesus makes clear his social and spiritual message, his revolutionary message of the coming of God's kingdom. 'For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.'

For what we are called to do is to follow Christ in valuing each other, and in caring for each other, especially when someone is in need. To come to someone's rescue when their need is great, no matter how inconvenient that might be at that particular moment, or how inappropriate that might be in the eyes of the world.

Saint Paul spells it out for all of us who are called to follow Christ:

'I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.'

This morning, when Holy Communion is over we leave church and enter the world to love and serve the Lord. This is the time for us to offer our love to God. In our everyday living we encounter many people. Perhaps we might reflect upon the basis of our relationship with them. Do we see and acknowledge the Christ in them? Do we delight in each other and in the strangers we encounter? When we do, then that is true love we offer to Christ.

At the heart of all this is the loving hospitality of God towards all peoples, and how we share in the life of God by offering and receiving loving hospitality to one another. One way we have of understanding more clearly what we are actually doing is to set our customs alongside those of another country. Let me speak about one of the customs of Romania as I know a little about that country and its table manners and its manners of hospitality.

Now, if you are invited as a guest to a peasant home in the countryside of Romania, you are first of all kissed, and God's blessing is invoked upon you, and then you are offered signs of love and hospitality. You are given bread and salt to eat, and wine to drink. The last time Anne and I received this welcome was in winter. The dirt road was deeply rutted with the passing of cart wheels, the sky was heavy with snow, the onion dome of the Orthodox church was weather beaten and neglected. The work of poverty and decades of hostility to Christ from the state.

The afternoon had turned into dusk, and men wrapped in sheepskin jerkins and wearing felt stove hats, were coming into the village from working in the open fields which stretch far away to the desolate horizon.

We entered into the warmth of a village house and received the traditional welcome from our hosts, an elderly man and woman, the mother and father of a dear friend of mine.

We had no spoken language in common, but as the old woman gave us the bread and salt and prayed the blessing, and the old man gave us the wine, warmed to combat the bitter winter night, the symbolic reference to Holy Communion in what we were doing irradiated my heart.

In that encounter, in that welcome from near strangers, men and women from different cultures opened their hearts to each other and saw the Christ in each other, foreigners though we were, ignorant though we were of each other's customs of hospitality. The love of Christ was present just as if Christ was sitting by the wood stove, looking on.

Amen.