

**Sermon at St John's Parish Eucharist, 31.8.25. Rev James Shakespeare**

*In the name of living God, Creator, Redeemer & Sustainer.*

Two Parables of Jesus from our Gospel, *Luke 14*.

'When you are invited to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honour... but when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place.'

'+When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or relatives or rich neighbours, in case they invite you in return... but invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you...'

+ from *Hebrews 13.1*, 'Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.'

Today is an important milestone in our journey of faith, in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord. For today is both the eve of a new school year – *take a deep breath! yes, September is almost here* – and also a day of new beginnings, as Ceri & I baptise Jenny & Max, from our congregation... an opportunity, as we look ahead, for all of us to renew our faith in Jesus Christ.

So my question today, looking at our readings, which are all about humility & hospitality is this: What does following Jesus, and belonging to His Kingdom really look like? That life which Jenny & Max, formally enter today, and all of us are invited to commit to.

Is it just an excuse for a weekly social gathering, with or without coffee & cake? Is it something that makes us feel good, without much bearing on our daily lives?

Or is it really real – the most real & challenging thing there is:- an invitation into a deep relationship with the living God, creator of heaven & earth; and being called (at some level) out of this world, into a whole new pattern of relationship, through Jesus; a new way of being, in the world, but not 'of' it; a new kind of community, a new way of living & relating to others, based on a radically different set of values & beliefs?

So let me share a story to illustrate the kind of life – the kind of Kingdom – that Jesus came to build [*& you will have your own stories to tell*], that life which we enter into in Baptism, and lies ahead of us, through God's peace, His Shalom - made possible by the transforming ministry, the life, death & resurrection, of Jesus Christ, the Messiah of God...

Some years ago, Alison & I lived in Leicester, where I was ministering at the time. And one weekend, we were invited to supper, with a friend, who was a very engaged vicar in one of our inner-city parishes, very multi-cultural and socially mixed – with high levels of poverty & social need. And as we were sitting at table, she told us a story.

*Many years earlier* our friend had been a vicar in Edinburgh, in a similar kind of context, and one day a young woman who was a single mum, with a tiny baby, and not well off, came into Church. Very quickly she became a member of the Church, a committed Christian, worshipping there every week - an important member of this community. My friend explained that the bench we were sitting at, at her table in Leicester, was the bench this person used to sit at in Church!

Anyhow, despite being out of work and having little money, this woman was very determined and bright, and had some amazing ideas, and she went on to become very successful. Yes, she became a very famous author: none other than J. K. Rowling, author of the world-famous Harry Potter books,

so much loved by us all! +My friend told us how some of the ideas in her books came to mind while sitting in that special Church in Edinburgh.

*'Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers' says Hebrews, 'for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.'*

If we truly welcome, in all humility, one another, as well as the outsider & the stranger in our midst, who knows what kind of world & church we might build, as we all share our gifts, support one another, and discern what believing in God + following Jesus might mean for each one of us?

In our Gospel, Jesus, at a meal with some Pharisees – who were very critical of him - notices how people often tend (first) to look after themselves and take the best place. So he challenges them a story about what it means to be humble and put others first...

'When you are invited to a wedding banquet' he says, 'do not sit down at the place of honour... but when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place.'

And he ends by suggesting that we mustn't always, when we have a party, invite the best people (the most prominent + richest + most good looking), but rather the opposite, 'the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind', because this is what God does. Jesus cares about everyone & he shows us that all are accepted in God's family – rich + poor, black + white, young + old, sick + healthy; no one is excluded from God's Kingdom. This is what living in Communion is really all about, what St Paul calls the Koinonia – or fellowship – of the Holy Spirit. Living in relationship, with one other, as we share – too – in relationship with God, who is Himself, a perfect fellowship of love, Father, Son & H. Spirit.

So a little exercise, for you to think about – and use your imagination..... yes, do dream dreams!

1. I want you to think about your school, your workplace or neighbourhood, and about the world more generally – perhaps especially, at this time, we're thinking about the suffering in Gaza, as well as Ukraine, Sudan, and all who are refugees or victims of prejudice. Q. who are the people in our community and in the wider world left out, those whom Jesus was concerned about?
2. And now I want you to think about some of the ways that we, locally, or in the wider world, might welcome them and reach out to help them, to make a better world. Q. How might God help us to reach out & help them, through our prayers and by our lives?

+I want to contrast 2 different kinds of world, the world as it often is now + the world that Jesus came to build, using the picture of a table & people invited to a meal:

■ 1<sup>st</sup>, a table where important people sit round, less important folks are further back and many are left out altogether.

O +2<sup>nd</sup>, a table or circle where everyone is invited and no one is left out from God's banquet, all belong and are welcome to come & feast in God's Kingdom.

In our reading from Hebrews, we hear those words about service well pleasing to God.

'Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.'

Yes, here we're invited to live as Jesus wants us to live: to care for strangers, to love each other, to remember those in prison and who are tortured, to do good and share what we have – all of which is

pleasing to God. There are lots of situations in our world where people are needed to do these things, to help people and make the world fairer and more peaceful.

+It all starts right here, in our Church, our neighbourhood, our home, our workplace – if we have one - & wider... We can be part of the welcoming team here at church, we can visit the sick or the housebound, we can encourage our young people, as they encourage & energise us; we can support our NHS – as many are doing – not least our gallant medics, including Jenny, & Catherine. *Keep up the great work!*

We can support our parish stewardship, our overseas mission links, and appointed St John's charities. Indeed, for all of us, as members of the Baptised, we are invited to explore – as we meditate on the scriptures, and learn more about God – what it means, not only to believe, but to live as a Christian, following in the footsteps of Jesus. Yes, wherever we are, following Jesus, we can strive for mutual love, humility, hospitality, mercy and justice... partnering with God, to enable him to bring this new world, God's transforming Kingdom, into being, once more.

So today, on the eve of this new school year, we welcome Jenny & Max, into the life of faith, through Baptism – *participating in the life-giving life, death & resurrection of Jesus Christ.*

+Today, in this sacrament, we affirm our faith, our sharing & belonging + our call to live a different kind of life, as we follow Christ, our servant King, helping to build His Kingdom.

+Let me end with a short poem, which really says it all. R. S. Thomas' poem, 'the Kingdom' –

It's a long way off but inside it  
There are quite different things going on:  
Festivals at which the poor man  
Is king and the consumptive is  
Healed; mirrors in which the blind look  
At themselves and love looks at them Back; and industry is for mending  
The bent bones and the minds fractured  
By life. It's a long way off, but to get  
There takes no time and admission  
Is free, if you purge yourself  
Of desire, and present yourself with  
Your need only and the simple offering  
Of your faith, green as a leaf.