

WOULD YOU LIKE JESUS HIMSELF TO COME TO YOUR DINNER PARTY?

(Sermon for Pentecost 12 – 1st September 2019 – Luke 14:1,7-14 and Hebrews 13:1-8,15-16)

I remember an article I read some time ago asking some well-known people who would be the three people they would most like to invite to dinner. There were all sorts of people mentioned including Albert Einstein, William Shakespeare, Mozart, Gandhi and the Dalai Lama. But the most regular and favoured person was Jesus of Nazareth. I wonder whether they had ever closely read this passage from Luke's Gospel today? Would you like Jesus himself to come to dinner at your place?

The second reading from the Letter to the Hebrews this morning states "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers." The writer of Hebrews connects this injunction to the well-known Old Testament story from the Book of Genesis of the story of Abraham, who once entertained three strangers who arrived at his tent, only to discover that these three strangers were in fact three angels, or messengers, sent from God.

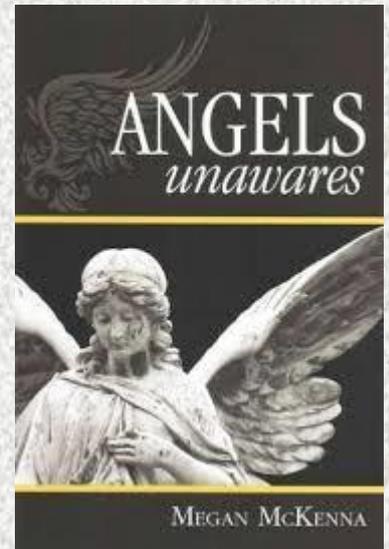
These messengers were bearers of very startling yet wonderful news to Abraham and his wife Sarah. Abraham and Sarah were now very old and far past the age of conceiving and having children. Sarah was ninety years old and Abraham 100 years old!!! They were childless.

Yet, God had promised years ago that Abraham would be the father of many nations. Now, lo and behold, Abraham is still apparently feeling somewhat "randy" and has intercourse with his wife that night and she falls immediately pregnant. Extraordinary story!!

This story has two thrusts. Firstly, the fulfilment of God's promises even in the face of impossible odds and, secondly, the importance of hospitality because you may in fact be entertaining messengers of God unawares. This passage from the Letter to the Hebrews is a great introduction to the Gospel passage this morning.

Jesus is invited into the house of an unnamed leader of the important Jewish religious and political group called the Pharisees. If you know anything about Jesus and the Pharisees, then this introduction is a strong clue that there is going to be some challenge and conflict. There are a number of occasions in the Gospels where Jesus locks horns with the Pharisees. Our anticipation of conflict is not disappointed. Jesus becomes the uncomfortable perhaps even rude guest who challenges his host about his hospitality and his guest list for the dinner.

Meals are generally very important places of meeting and discussion and of challenge in the Gospel stories. Indeed, meals **were always** very important activities in the Middle Eastern culture and convention of Biblical times, both for giving hospitality and for arranging people in their rank and class in society. In the Bible, meals are often given deep theological significance. Indeed, Luke 13:29 speaks of the day when people will come from the east and the west, and from the north and south, to eat in the Kingdom of God.



One thing the Messiah would do at his final coming in glory is to hold a great banquet and to invite people and especially the poor and oppressed and powerless to be an important part of that banquet. Surely Luke, in this passage today, is making a connection between the eating and drinking of Jesus in this present meal with the Pharisee and his guests, and the eating and drinking that shall occur in the fulfilled Kingdom of God where all are welcome and equal.

This meal at the house of the Pharisee is a drama in four acts. Firstly, a man is healed by Jesus at this feast which is held on the Sabbath day. Is it in the Kingdom of God's purpose and love to heal on the Sabbath? Jesus clearly states: Yes, it is! In fact, it seems to be quite hypocritical anyway for the Pharisee to hold a major feast on the Sabbath, when servants are expected to work hard, and yet the Pharisee then declares sharp criticism of Jesus for working a healing miracle work on the Sabbath!!

The second act in the drama is that Jesus notes the jostling for positions of primacy as guests decide who is the most worthy to be near the coveted top position at the table. Then, the third act is where Jesus challenges and instructs the host on who in fact should have been invited to the dinner. The last act is where Jesus tells the Parable of the Great Feast where the invited guests fail to come, giving all sorts of excuses, and, as a result, their places are then filled by the homeless and dispossessed and unclean from every lane and alleyway of the town. This is the way, says Jesus, the Kingdom of Heaven is.

Jesus confronts the invited guests saying that they should not jockey for the best places of honour at the table, but instead, be humble and choose the lowest places so that the host can then, if he wishes, invite them up to a higher place, *"for all who humble themselves will be exalted and those who exalt themselves will be humbled."* And, surely, the implication here is that it is **God** who raises the lowly and who also puts down the high and mighty.

This links in powerfully with the Song of Mary, often called the Magnificat, where Mary sings that she is the chosen one to be the bearer of God's Son, Jesus, and that he will be the one to exalt the humble and meek and cast down the mighty from their thrones. Here, Jesus is both telling people how they should behave, and also telling them that this is exactly how God himself behaves in exalting the humble and humbling the exalted.

Jesus then turns to his host with a powerful and demanding challenge. After all, it is in most of our normal natures to invite people to dinner that we like and enjoy, and from whom we probably expect some return either in an invitation back or in receiving their good continuing friendship. Jesus instead proposes a complete break in the reciprocity cycle. Jesus proposes inviting the poor, the crippled, the lame and those at the bottom of society, that is people who can never repay our invitation. Jesus is promoting the great gifts of hospitality and generosity irrespective of expecting reciprocity in return. Indeed, in the great heavenly banquet, those who were on the outside for whatever reason in their earthly life are now treated as important guests at God's eternal table where all are welcome and all are enabled to be equal.

So, I return to the question I asked at the start: “Would you like Jesus himself to come to your dinner party?” We may be extremely honoured to have such an interesting and important and wonderful guest. But, let’s face it, Jesus was not always the most polite and pleasant of dinner guests!!

I like to think that Jesus accepted the invitation and came to this unnamed Pharisee’s home because Jesus knew that this man was ready to be challenged and would somehow see beyond the apparent impoliteness and legalistic law-breaking of Jesus’ behavior, to the far deeper message of God’s total reorientation of power and class, and the total worthiness of all God’s children in the Kingdom of God both here on earth and in heaven.

The Pharisee was unnamed. Why was that? Perhaps he didn’t want it known. There was also no mention of the disciples being present at this feast so how did Luke know about this story? My guess is that the unnamed Pharisee after this event, at some stage became a secret follower of Jesus, and it was he who told this story to Luke. If so then this story becomes even more powerful as it was not only a teaching opportunity for Jesus but also a conversion event for the Pharisee!