

Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> September

Proverbs 25:6-7

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

Luke 14:1, 7-14

When my daughter was in her teenage years she often used to invite her friends round for meals. There was one particular friend Rachel – still Hannah’s “bestie” – who was often to be found eating tea with us. And Rachel pointed out on numerous occasions how much she enjoyed the fact that we sat around the table as a family to eat, giving us the chance to talk to each other and listen to each other. Sometimes mundane things about the day; occasionally more serious things. Shared mealtimes are very important – and I know that eating alone can be one of the hardest things about living on one’s own.

Meals were important to Jesus too. Often we read in the gospels about him eating meals with people; after he invited Zaccheaus to come down from the tree Jesus ate a meal with him; a woman anointed his feet as he shared a meal with Simon the Pharisee; in our gospel story today we read about a meal at another Pharisee’s home. And of course all importantly that final meal he had with his friends – the Last Supper as its come to be known. The one we remember week by week as we meet around the table for bread and wine. For the early church this was always remembered in the context of a shared meal.

Meals are important because they are times when people are able to spend time talking and listening, exchanging views and learning from each other. Meals are sociable occasions. We all know this. After a marriage ceremony in church or at a register office or wherever the very first thing just about every married couple do is celebrate by having a meal with those closest to them; birthdays are celebrated with meals out with family and friends; Christmas dinner – perhaps the most special meal of the year – is often the highlight of a family’s year.

As we have said, the church celebrates the special holy communion meal most weeks, we occasionally have shared meals such as the one we had when the Bishop came and the one we will share in a few weeks time to celebrate Harvest. An integral part of Messy Church is some kind of eating together. Meals put us at ease, and make it simpler for relationships to develop. And of course Jesus was well aware of this.

But Jesus says some things in our reading about who we should eat with, and they are echoed elsewhere in the Bible. “When you give a dinner do not invite your friends, but invite the poor and the outcast” Or in the letter to the Hebrews which was our second reading today “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers for by doing so some have entertained angels without knowing it”.

We have some good friends who we meet up with for a meal every few months. Its always good to catch up on the news, to hear about their joys and sadnesses, to learn of what they have been up to and to share our stories too. And every evening we have with them finishes with making another date 3 or 4 months into the future. Sharing meals with friends is wonderful; it keeps friendships alive and develops them; it enriches all our lives as we can talk about the things that really matter in the company of people who know us and care for us. But sharing a meal with a stranger – deliberately inviting the poor and outcast – well that’s a different story.

Thinking back I can recall a couple of occasions where we invited people who were living on their own to celebrate Christmas with us. When I was a curate in London we invited two elderly men in the parish who both lived on their own. Edward and Tom. “Just one more piece of pudding” Edward and “alright just one more whisky” Tom. Our drinks cupboard and fridge may have taken a severe bashing, but we had a wonderful time hearing their stories and recollections; finding out about their lives and beginning to understand what had made them the people they had become. Entertaining angels unawares.

But sadly that is something that has been an exception rather than a norm. Perhaps I need to think about that for myself.

Sharing meals with strangers – even the word stranger makes us nervous. Our society is wary of strangers; we instinctively recoil from the different. We tend to enjoy the company of people like us, but not of those who aren’t. And yet we are urged here by Jesus to invite those who are different; those we don’t know – or rather those we don’t yet know.

I think the message in the bible readings today goes way beyond meals. Jesus is teaching an important lesson about the value of all people. Everyone is valued by God; everyone is loved by God; everyone is made in God’s image. Its all too easy to immerse ourselves in the company of those who are like us, who don’t challenge us, who don’t provoke us, who don’t offer differing views and opinions, who don’t have varying life experiences. And we are the worse for it.

I don't very often mention the dreaded B word in sermons. But in the build-up to the 2016 referendum I found I had unintentionally put myself in the position where I only really listened to one side of the argument. Just about all the people I read about and followed on social media were on the Remain side; as were most of my friends; most of my family and the newspaper I regularly read. I'm not saying that I would have voted any differently if I had listened to the other point of view, but I certainly wouldn't have been so surprised and shocked when the result came in! I simply wasn't aware that there were so many people who held views at odds to mine.

And one of the dangers with this fear of the stranger; this wariness of the different is that it can breed in us a false sense of importance or status. Hence Jesus's comments about how we seat ourselves at the table – sentiments that seem to echo those we had in our first reading from the book of Proverbs.

By not listening to the "other", by having no or little contact with those who are not like us we can begin to view them as less than we are.

I have known several white people who were very uneasy about black or Asian people moving in along their street. I have heard the words "this street is being taken over by Asians - they are bringing the tone of the neighbourhood down". And yet I have heard these self same white people saying how wonderful their next door neighbour is, how they bring in meals, how they do the shopping, how they look out for them, how they treat them as part of the family. And it turns out, of course, that their next door neighbour is of Asian origin. Yes, but they are lovely is the response I get to a question. When the unknown and the stranger becomes the known and a friend our perceptions and feelings change. Entertaining angels unawares.

Now I know that none of this is easy. I find it just as hard as any of you. But maybe sometimes we just have to take a step of faith out of what we might call our comfort zone. Maybe talk to someone we don't know, perhaps a homeless person on the streets, maybe that person who has moved in up the road (whatever ethnic group they belong to), possibly the scruffy old man who we see at the bus stop. And who knows, it could well be that we will find that we have encountered a warm and lovely person, one who doesn't necessarily see things as we do, but one who is unique and loved by God and one whose value is the same as ours. Entertaining angels unawares.