

Collect, Readings and Reflection for 31 August 2025, the 11th Sunday after Trinity

Collect (*the Church's prayer for today*):

O God, you declare your almighty power most chiefly in showing mercy and pity: mercifully grant to us such a measure of your grace, that we, running the way of your commandments, may receive your gracious promises, and be made partakers of your heavenly treasure; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Or

God of glory,
the end of our searching,
help us to lay aside
all that prevents us from seeking your kingdom,
and to give all that we have
to gain the pearl beyond all price,
through our Saviour Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Readings: Hebrews 13:1-8,15-16; Luke 14:1,7-14

Today's reflection is by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Cain.

Making space at the table

Last weekend Rebecca and I made our sixteenth annual pilgrimage to the Greenbelt Festival. The talks, music and worship were both fun and challenging, as ever. The first talk that we went to was in a tent called Wild Goose, hosted by the Iona Community. The talk had the catchy title, *Unthinking the west: mission beyond empire*, and it was delivered as a conversation between representatives of the Church Mission Society, CMS, and United Society Partners in the Gospel, USPG. If you're unsure why it might be necessary to 'unthink the west', then it might be helpful to remember this famous quote of Desmond Tutu:

"When the missionaries came to Africa, they had the Bible, and we had the land. They said, 'Let us pray'. We closed our eyes. When we opened them, we had the Bible, and they had the land."

While the Bible in Africa was a precious gift no doubt, the missionary enterprise was tied up with colonial ambitions and this was at best, a mixed blessing for the communities that received them. During their conversation, Duncan Dormor, the General Secretary of USPG and Harvey Kwiyani, the African Christianity Programme Lead for CMS suggested that theologians from the west need to move down the bench to make space at the table for those from African and other global majority countries. Moving down the bench to make space at the table ... this phrase reminded me of Jesus' parable in our gospel reading.

Picture the scene. You arrive at a wedding breakfast, misread the table plan – perhaps you think you're on table one, when in fact you're on table ten – and you sit in the wrong seat. The father of the bride points out your mistake and asks you to move. There is a little social awkwardness, which is likely covered up with some laughter, and you move. No big deal. This would not have been so straightforward in Jesus' time or culture. What we would see as a minor social error would be a major infringement of etiquette. Sitting in the wrong seat. Assuming a place of honour that was not yours. Being asked to move by the host. Public humiliation. This could bring a whole heap of shame on you and your family.

This honour/ shame dynamic was a very powerful force in Jesus' time, just as it is today in many parts of the world. If we westerners chose too high a seat at a dining table and were asked to move down the table, it might be a bit embarrassing. We might not get served our food first or have a front row seat for the speeches, but that would be about the end of it. For an easterner, and in Jesus' time, the same act would see you shamed in front of everyone, and such a loss of honour could affect all areas of life. Arranged marriages might need to be reshuffled: perhaps your son isn't worthy of his daughter after all. The bakers' guild might kick you out, even though your family has been members for generations. Powerful stuff.

Jesus understood the honour/ shame dynamic very well. He lived and told stories within its rules, and he used these stories to expose the hypocrisy and misguided teaching and practice of the Pharisees and religious leaders in his own community. These leaders wore their strict observance of Sabbath and Jewish law as a badge of honour and showed their love of God by keeping themselves pure, holy, clean. In this encounter, and many others in the gospel accounts, Jesus exposes how they have neglected their duty under the law to love neighbour; to invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. Eventually the only way the Pharisees and religious leaders in his own community could restore their honour, was to have Jesus publicly shamed, convicted and killed as a criminal. Powerful stuff.

I'm going to move on to a contemporary and pressing issue for our own time, but before I do, I would like to notice something about the parable that Jesus' told. Nobody is excluded from the wedding feast. The poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind are invited. Sure, some people are asked to move to a worse seat and some to a better seat, some are humbled, and others are exalted, but there is no suggestion that anyone is asked to leave. We may have to change places at the table, but there is room for everyone. This parable provides a vision of the kingdom of God. The kingdom in which, as Christians, we are asked to participate. And that might mean making space at our tables. Moving on.

I want you to imagine our country, the UK, as a giant wedding feast. As wedding feasts go, it's not always a party, but most people can live peacefully, without fear of harassment; there's generally enough food to go around. There are plenty of seats at the banqueting table but, unlike the kingdom of God, there isn't a space for everyone. There are similar wedding feasts available in most European countries. I want you to imagine some other countries. Afghanistan, Iran, Eritrea. For many people who live

there, these countries don't feel much like a wedding feast. In fact, they feel more like hell than the kingdom of God. And so, some of the people in those countries travel in search of a place at the European tables.

One such traveller is known to us here at St James'. Last year he helped to construct the Pantry and more recently he has helped to install the new kitchen in the Parish Centre. I will call him M. Before coming to the UK, M ran a successful joinery business in Iran and employed around 250 people. One day, after work, he and a friend witnessed some Iranian policemen harassing a young woman because she wasn't wearing the hijab. M and his friend intervened. The next day M's friend was arrested by the police, and he has not been seen again. With the encouragement of family and friends M fled Iran in fear of his life. After a perilous journey and a 2-year stay in a local hotel, M was granted asylum and right to remain in the UK earlier this year.

M and many like him are refugees and asylum seekers and their right to flee and to seek a place at a European table is enshrined in international law. His is just one story. One story among the one hundred thousand stories of refugees currently seeking asylum in the UK. One story among the forty-one thousand stories of refugees who crossed the English Channel in small boats last year. One story among the thirty-five thousand stories of refugees currently housed in small hotels around the country. Most of these individual stories will be heart-breaking, but the scale of migration and the way people seeking refuge and asylum are arriving on European shores is a big political problem. You don't need me to tell you that.

Earlier this week the leader of a small but growing political party in the UK outlined his party's policy to deal with this problem. The policy looks very similar to that being employed by the current administration in the United States. When a similar policy was outlined using similar language two years ago by the then Home Secretary, a well-known football pundit and English national treasure posted on social media: "This is just an immeasurably cruel policy directed at the most vulnerable people in language that is not dissimilar to that used by Germany in the 1930s."

Mr Lineker's post caused a stir. In the UK we do not live in an honour/ shame culture, but we do have another powerful system which guides communal behaviour. Fair play. Just as there are many heart-breaking stories of refugees seeking asylum, so there are many heart-breaking stories of people living in the UK whose lives are blighted by poverty, poor housing, education, access to healthcare, a lack of opportunity. Easy for Gary Linekar, until recently the highest paid presenter on the BBC, to tweet in favour of refugees.

Friends, there is no doubt that international migration is a big political issue, and that the asylum system in the UK is not currently fit for purpose. Housing refugees and asylum seekers in hotels can leave the communities surrounding the hotels with a genuine grievance. It's just not fair. But dehumanising refugees and asylum seekers with the language of fear is not part of the solution. The most shameful periods of human history show us that.

Friends, there is equally no doubt that we do not show our love of God by distancing ourselves from the issue, keeping ourselves clean, pure, holy. Followers of Jesus Christ are called to expose the hypocrisy of dehumanising language and show love of God by loving neighbour. And that might mean making space at our tables. Space for refugees and space for those in the UK impacted by poverty. “Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.” (Hebrews 13:2)

Another speaker at the Wild Goose tent this year was Iona Community member and Greenbelt regular, John Bell. At the end of his talk, he announced that this was to be his last big talk at the festival. At 75 years of age, he is moving along the bench to make space for other (younger) voices. Reflecting on his experience as a speaker, he remarked that his audiences often asked him to give them hope. “Hope”, he said, “Is not a gift I can bestow. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. If you want hope, go and do something hopeful.”

Amen.

