11th Sunday after Trinity, Eccl, Hebrews, Luke 14. Parish Eucharist

Last Sunday we had the story of the woman who had been crippled for 18 years and was being ignored by all and sundry as some passed her on the way to the synagogue to pray and worship, and as others went about their daily life. She was ignored until Jesus came along. Perhaps there were others who felt the need to help her but didn’t want to be seen as being the odd one out, but Jesus didn’t care what others thought, he knew what was best for humanity and for the understanding about having a good relationship with his Father, our Lord God.

Helena, our youngest, would always ask if I knew someone after I had said hello to them, and very often, especially if we were away from home, I wouldn’t know them so she would then say why say hello to them. Apart from it just being in my nature I’d reply that you don’t know where that simple greeting, that taking a tiny bit of your time, might lead to. It is now with a smile on my face as she recounts her own stories of conversations she has had with strangers on buses and trains, as she travels up and down the country, and actually one of her best friends was a complete stranger until a chance hello on a train.

These readings today just epitomise God’s love for us all, and a love which is equal and knows no bounds, a love that he wants to share with all and sundry. I was chatting with someone last week about the parable of the vineyard owner who employed men from the beginning of the day, the middle of the day and at the end of the day and paid them the same amount of money, which was deemed unfair by the person I was chatting with. On a purely basic monetary level it was fair because they had all agreed to the wage they were to be paid and the rich owner could do what he wanted with his money; but that parable is not about money or work, it is about God’s love for each and every one of us. His love is as equal and as powerful if we choose to love him at a very early stage of our life, or if we choose to love him at the very end of our life. God does not discriminate between the length of time we have loved him, or the amount of work we have done in his name. Unlike our love for someone, God’s love does not get stronger with time, he just goes all in at the beginning of the relationship.

As we hear in the gospel reading, there is no hierarchy about Gods love, it does not matter whether we sit at the top table, in the middle, the furthest away from the host, or haven’t even made it into the banquet, the bottom line is always that God loves us. Full stop. God doesn’t wake up in the morning and think about what we were like the day before, what we did, or didn’t do, what we said or didn’t say. He wakes up with us in the morning and loves us, and loves us way beyond the level of love we mere humans can ever love.

These banquet stories would have been very worrying to those who were present with Jesus, those whose lives had all been about self and how one could rise up the imaginary ladder to get closer to God. Jesus seems to be suggesting to his distinguished audience that they have no idea of the criteria that God is using to send out his invitations. No amount of working your way up the religious hierarchical ladder is going to guarantee admission to his kingdom.

But if, despite all the unknowing and uncertainty, you still want to be at the wedding feast, what are you supposed to do? If God’s measures are so eccentric, archaic and beyond our human thoughts, how can we be sure of our invitation? If we are only asking this question for ourselves then I think we will struggle on that journey to the banquet, however, if the question you ask is changed slightly and we all start to think along the lines of asking, how can everybody get an invitation to the banquet, then we will be moving on the same wavelength as Jesus. We need to become genuinely happy that the local street person is sat beside Jesus at the banquet, and we’re sat on a table hidden behind a pillar. We need to learn that including everybody at the banquet does not devalue my own invitation.

At the of the day we have done little, or even nothing, to earn our invitation to God’s banquet, so why should we be resentful about God’s grace to others, as my friend was with the landowner who paid the same wages to the workers whether they had worked for one hour or 10 hours. I hear some of you say then, why do we bother doing good works on behalf of God, why do we put ourselves out and forgo some of the things we really want to do if this makes no difference to our invitation to the banquet?

If we truly believe in our Lord God, and truly understand and accept his unconditional love for us, then I am sure we would always want to reciprocate that to others, and if we’re not reciprocating this love and care then we should be feeling a whole sense of guilt and failure, not something most people want to be carrying around with them.

The hospitality that Jesus exhorted his disciples to practice was one that broke down tribal barriers, it overcame divisions of race and gender, of age and class. Jesus, like His Father, welcomes all.

That’s why churches need to remember that it’s not our communion service, our altar, it’s Jesus’s meal and he desires to share it with all-comers, which is why I and the PCC have an issue with the concept of Confirmation, because if it is Jesus’s meal he would want everyone to partake, not just those who have done the course. How inclusive do you think are churches really are, and is this the same answer that somebody not already a part of the church community would give?

As the reading from Hebrew’s starts, let mutual love continue, let the love God has for us be continually shown to all, to those we know and love, as well as the stranger on the train, the bus or walking through the town. And if we are to fully follow our Lord then we will be making a concerted effort to befriend those whom others walk past. Jesus lived out the hospitality of God, and he now invites us to live and practice God’s hospitable heart.