

The angels of the Round Table...



Rosa Parks, taking her seat on the bus, in Apartheid. A seat that was not for those of her status. And in doing so, playing her part in changing the world

I think in God's holy kingdom, all the tables will be round.

But here, faced with rectangular ones, what do we do...

When faced with society's pecking order, and the inner human drive to compare ourselves with others, what do we do...

Take the lower seat, says Jesus....

Just stroll in and sit right at the bottom.

But we have to be careful with this reading.

It's not about selling yourself short.

Nor about valuing yourself little.

Nor, heaven forfend, about false humility.

It's more about refusing to participate in the human need to place a value on everything and everyone, and the result of that in unfair systems, and broken spirits.

Don't break your spirit, says Jesus, just break the system ... by refusing to be defined by it.

We have a God who isn't interested in pecking order games.

In God's holy heaven all tables will be round, because he gazes on us all with the same love.

The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me? say our readings today.

Well, actually quite a lot.

But only depending on whose voice we listen to.

There are two sets of voices in our lives – the voice of God that says “I will never leave you or forsake you” or there's the other voices that say “in our world you are not worthy”.

Verses 2-6 are taken out from the chapter of the gospel set for today. They tell the story of Jesus' love for the socially worthless, a love that lifts up and restores.

Jesus has a Sabbath meal, surrounded by the powerful in society. And he meets a man with a shaming disease. Jesus questions the gathering on whether it is appropriate to heal him on the sabbath, and there is a confused shifting of feet. He heals him, with a challenge to the assembled gathering : *if one of you has a child or an ox that falls into a well on the Sabbath day, will you not immediately pull it out?* And they had nothing to say. Because he was asking them to be honest about the worth of all, in the eyes of love.

God will go to any lengths through love of you. He will walk right down the length of that rectangular table...

So when he then starts talking about seats at tables... what is at stake here is not our seat at the table, or our recognition in society.

It's our core being – it's who we are. Because the games the world plays with value and power are insidious. You start to listen to them. To make them your own story. To believe that your value – or the value of others - rests on the power we have to judge each other.

The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?

How many times have I heard people say to me.... "I'd always been told I would never be much at ... singing/spelling/ (whatever skill) ... it took a lot to overcome that."

When I was a teenager I learnt to play the church organ. And I was told by a very influential voice in my life that I would never make a particularly good organist. Never play in cathedrals. Those voices do come in our lives; or sometimes whisper in our own hearts from our own worries and fears – and shape us in all sorts of ways; not to expect to achieve much, bless much. I always wore that definition. That I hadn't really got much to offer. I never dreamed dreams, about music, or about anything else really.

Decades later, another voice came on the scene. An excellent director of music, with a good choir who sang cathedral tours. He invited me to be his organist. Oh I can't possibly, I said. I am not qualified, I haven't the right letters after my name, I am not good enough, I'm not a *proper* organist. Well, he said, I'm not a proper Director of Music, I am a landscape gardener for my living, and you are plenty good enough for me. And so I did, and we made joyous music to the Lord in cathedrals all over the land.

Love one another – and honour the stranger and the lowly - says S. Paul - because sometimes in that way people have entertained angels unaware

He was an angel, that choirmaster; a messenger of God's love. God's power to dream dreams. He lifted up the lowly. Not because he encouraged me to play in cathedrals, but because he told me not to worry about other people's definitions. But just to live life with whatever graces God has given. And when we do that, we also learn to look out for those around us and help them to do the same.

God's Sabbath freedom.

Which voice are you going to listen to?

Which voice are you going to speak and act with?

The Lord's voice, or the power and status games of the world?

The heavens are desolate says the prophet Jeremiah today. Because in our striving to find our place at the table, we lose sight of our shared humanity.

It isn't power and status that gives us worth, it is how we love. There are those who, in their own self-importance, or anxious need for recognition, choose for themselves to sit at the top of the table But the trouble with being full of self-importance, or full of anxiety about other's opinions is... there is little room there for simple love of others. It limits us, and the humans we can become, and help each other to become.

As we read those words from the letter to the Hebrews today

Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured as though you yourselves were being tortured....

... and we reflect on Jesus' words in the gospel alongside them - it might bring uncomfortable memories of Nigel Farage's recent speech about deporting people back to terrorist regimes where they are sure to be tortured – of setting up huge inhumane systems for those at the lowest end of society. It might call us to stand in our faith against such messages in our society. Against hate, against exclusion, against violence. Our scriptures remind us again and again to treat exiles as brothers and sisters; to remember that we are ourselves but pilgrims in a land that we do not own, but that God has given us; to remember that what is the experience of one, can so quickly and easily become an experience we ourselves share.

The world IS skewed to the side of recognising a certain set of people, to giving power and voice to a certain section of society. And God calls us to actively set ourselves against that, to take our seat with those who have no power. To lift each other up.

'Do not neglect to do good, and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God', S. Paul reminds us.

We are never told that Jesus had compassion on a person because of their worth, it was only ever because of their need, or their love and faith. Jesus' delight in people was never because of their status, but only ever because of the openness of their heart to love.

There's the Voice of Love. And there's the squawking of the pecking order.

In God's kingdom the tables would be round. And all would sit around it. For there would be no higher status, all would just long to gaze in the face of others and rejoice. All of us would be angels unaware.