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St Peter's

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Sermon: 31st August 2025: 11th after Trinity

St Mary's Todmorden, St Michael's Cornholme and St Peter's Walsden

Jeremiah 2: 4-13 ⁴Hear the word of the Lord, house of Jacob and all the families of the house of Israel. ⁵Thus says the Lord: What wrong did your ancestors find in me that they went far from me And after worthless things, and became worthless themselves? ⁶They did not say, 'Where is the Lord who brought us up from the land of Egypt, who led us in the wilderness in a land of deserts and pits, in a land of drought and deep darkness, in a land that no one passes through, where no one lives?' ⁷I brought you into a plentiful land to eat its fruits and its good things. But when you entered you defiled my land and made my heritage an abomination. ⁸The priests did not say 'Where is the Lord?' Those who handle the law did not know me; the rulers transgressed against me; the prophets prophesied by Baal and went after things that do not profit. ⁹Therefore once more I accuse you, says the Lord and I accuse your children's children. ¹⁰Cross to the coasts of Cyprus and look, send to Kedar and examine with care; see if there has ever been such a thing. ¹¹Has a nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods? But my people have changed their glory for something that does not profit. ¹²Be appalled, heavens, be shocked, be utterly desolate, says the Lord, ¹³for my people have committed two evils, they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water and dug cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that hold no water.

Hebrews 13: 1-8, 15-16 ¹³ Let mutual love continue. ² Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. ³ 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. ⁴ Let marriage be held in honour by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers. ⁵ Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, 'I will never leave you or forsake you.' ⁶ So we can say with confidence, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?' ⁷ Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. ⁸ Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever. ¹⁵ Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. ¹⁶ Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

Luke 14: 1, 7-14 ¹⁴ On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a Pharisee leader to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely. ⁷ When he noticed how guests chose the places of honour, he told them a parable. ⁸ 'When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honour, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host ⁹ and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you "Give this person your place" and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. ¹⁰ When you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so when your host comes, he may say to you, "Friend move up higher"; then you will be honoured in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. ¹¹ For all who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted.' ¹² He said also to the one who had invited him, 'When you give a lunch or dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbours, in case they may invite you in return and you would be repaid. ¹³ But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. ¹⁴ And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.'



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Sermon: When I was a trainee barrister, studying for my Bar Finals at the Inns of Court, I had to eat a number of dinners at Lincoln's Inn, which was the Inn of Court to which I belonged. It was a centuries old tradition, which meant that you had to sit and eat a, not very brilliant, three course meal, with a glass or so of wine and get to know your colleagues in the legal profession. And until you had eaten the required number of dinners you could not qualify as a barrister. It was as important as passing your exams.

The trick to making the whole thing more palatable was to try to get a seat at the High table, with the Benchers or senior barristers at the Inn, because on the Benchers' tables you got much better food and a lot more wine. The most certain way to get a place was to be invited by a more senior barrister, maybe because you were doing a placement with them or in some cases because you might be related to them.

But the other way was to get to the meal early and grab a place at the top end of the lower benches. Because they did not want the top tables empty, the powers that were would choose trainee barristers from the top end of the lower benches to fill the spare spaces. I enjoyed the privilege on a number of occasions because the friends and fellow students I was with loved playing the game. The whole exercise always reminded me of today's Gospel reading; they would literally use the phrase, "move up higher"! As someone who did not come from a legal family and had no connections whatsoever, I always felt like an imposter getting to sit at the High Table and it has coloured my reading of this Gospel.

The Gospel reading raises quite a number of questions about human dignity if read literally. For example, how did those who were poor, crippled, blind and lame, feel about suddenly being dragged in off the street or from the fields to fill the spare places at the rich man's table? Would they be looked down on by the other guests? Are their feelings even considered when the surprise invitation is issued? Would there be comments about their clothing? In another version of this story in Matthew 22, those with the wrong wedding robe get thrown out.

Would they like the posher food served? I remember one Sunday around that part of my life, handing out some very choice and expensive Marks and Spencer mini-bananas at the Westminster Cathedral Night Shelter run by the Sisters of St Vincent de Paul. Every customer without exception had never come across such special bananas before and were offended by being short-changed with smaller bananas than usual. In my last parish, the quails eggs donated to the foodbank during Covid by a breeder whose restaurant outlets were closed, didn't go down too well either.

And is the purpose of this surprise dinner invitation simply to boost the moral credentials of the richer people giving the banquet and earn them places in heaven? That functional use of people who are poorer or more vulnerable for the eternal benefit of those giving banquets is one of the criticisms of Christianity by secularists. Do we do this only because of the reward in heaven rather than for the sake of our siblings, our fellow human beings and do we even think about their dignity?

I think that all those questions possibly miss the point a bit. Jesus is not a moral teacher giving us advice like a self-help book; here are some tips for getting into heaven quicker... Instead he is teaching us what God and God's Kingdom are about. In today's Gospel Jesus simply makes



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the point that we are all hung up on status and that is not what God is worried about. God does not see the distinctions that human beings draw amongst people and classes of people.

Jesus' example also makes the point that we are hung up on an economy of exchange. The dinner party game was not just about seats at the table and how high up they were but also about who was wealthy enough to host a dinner party, but also who was worthy enough to be invited to other peoples' dinner parties. It was about transactional dinner parties, not meals of people gathered for friendship.

But what he is really talking about is a God who does not make distinctions, a God who does not care who sits where at dinner parties; a God who does not attach conditions or expectations to his invitation to heaven; a God who does not expect payment or dinner parties or indeed anything in return for his invitation to eternal life. It is quite countercultural in our western, capitalist economy.

It is fun at the Crypt Café to watch new customers' faces when they ask how much the soup costs and we say there is no charge. But then we add, if you want to donate you can... if we were genuinely being heaven-like we might not even ask for donations. But if we didn't get the donations we would not be able to keep going.

And we don't always like the free gift model, especially if we have done fairly well in life and feel we have worked hard for our social position, our home and family. We convince ourselves we deserve what we have achieved, and worse still, we sometimes imagine that people who are different from us have failed to earn any kind of fortune. Yet Jesus says that when it comes to God, all is gift. We deserve nothing. Everything is given to us by God regardless of our merit. And when we try to live within this gift economy, things are transformed. We cannot control what we get in donations from the café and yet God has continually provided for it.

And there are things we get completely for free, even in our modern, western world. Just take a moment to think about when you last received anything for free, regardless of status, regardless of what you have done to earn it. Perhaps I can suggest an answer; at the start of worship we pray the confession and hear God's forgiveness declared. That promise of forgiveness and acceptance is free. We have not deserved it and cannot earn it. It is God's unconditional love for us. The same happens when we receive Holy Communion. We are fed by God's precious gift of Christ, God himself. We have done nothing to earn it.

George Herbert's poem, "Love," speaks of this transforming, unconditional grace and our struggle to understand and accept it.

LOVE bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back, Guilty of dust and sin.

But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack From my first entrance in,

Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning If I lack'd anything.

'A guest,' I answer'd, 'worthy to be here:' Love said, 'You shall be he.'

'I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear, I cannot look on Thee.'

Love took my hand and smiling did reply, 'Who made the eyes but I?'

'Truth, Lord; but I have marr'd them: let my shame Go where it doth deserve.'

'And know you not,' says Love, 'Who bore the blame?' 'My dear, then I will serve.'

'You must sit down,' says Love, 'and taste my meat.' So I did sit and eat.