



Rev Helen Jacobi

Table manners

Year C Ordinary Sunday 22

Proverbs 25:6-7

Hebrews 13:1-3, 6

Luke 14:1, 7-14

28 August 2022

One of the things I love about travel or being part of another culture is learning the food and table etiquette – in Singapore recently we were hosted to a formal business lunch in a Chinese restaurant and I found myself watching our host closely to make sure I ate things in the right order and matched the right sauces and spices.

In France I know not to cut my lettuce from a salad but fold it; and I know which order to eat the cheese in. In our former days of hosting dinner parties at the High Commission in Canada Stephen would spend time working out the seating plan, who was the guest of honour, and on from there.

In Jesus' time sharing of meals were very structured affairs, whether a family meal or a gathering of friends or business associates. There were lots of rules. So in today's reading, Jesus is invited one day to the house of the leader of the Pharisees, for a Sabbath meal. This is not a family tea, this is a highly structured and ritualised meal in the house of the wealthy. The meal would have been served by slaves and servants, and Jesus notes how the guests (the men) take the places of honour.

There was at any of these meals a hierarchy of seating – the top table was reserved for the top guests, and each table was ranked. Now there wasn't a seating plan or name cards – it was much more subtle than that. An invitation would have been sent and it would include the guest list.

So you could figure out ahead of time where your place was on the list. First century Palestine was a very stratified society and so everyone knew their place. Then on the day of the banquet a messenger would come with a reminder invitation.¹

If you were of a humble disposition you would sit lowish in the pecking order but if you were ambitious you would probably risk pushing up the ranks a bit and see if you could get away with it.

The risk was that your host would come and embarrass you and say – excuse me but please give up your seat for this guest. The trouble was that the top table literally had the best food and wine and the lower table had the cheap stuff, with lots of bread and not much else.²

Jesus seems at first to be simply commenting on the social etiquette and reminding people of their manners - he quotes Proverbs (25:6-7) – it is better to be asked “friend, come up higher” than to be embarrassed. But then he goes that bit further and says don’t invite your friends to dinner, because they will repay you – indeed all invitations, gifts, were very definitely expected to be repaid by something of similar value – but instead invite those who cannot repay you. We wouldn’t use the language quoted today – words like “cripple” – but Jesus was challenging the Pharisee and others to invite those considered (in those times) unsuitable for an invitation.

I am sure the Pharisee, the host, a religious leader, was not at all pleased with Jesus’ advice. I wonder what place he gave Jesus at the table?

Meals and banquets are often the subject of Jesus’ teaching – sometimes the banquet is the heavenly banquet of the future, sometimes the way the kingdom of God will be, sometimes Jesus is simply enjoying a good meal with friends.

¹ p289 New Interpreter’s Bible vol 9

² p286 New IB

In all his meal encounters Jesus offers a new model for living: friend come higher up, come and join us at our table.

NZ writer Dr Rosemary Dewerse says:

“Spaciousness is something I believe Jesus invites us into. As we follow him we are caught up into the big dreams of God, visions that have room enough for everyone, for every living thing in creation. Following Jesus we have the opportunity to see things from God’s-eye-view, a perspective of reconciliation and boundless hope. And we can live, even amongst the crap and tears and struggle, expectant of kairos, of the inbreaking of the Spirit who goes before us.”³

Jesus is challenging us to think about space and hospitality – in our lives personally; as communities; and in our city and world.

We are looking forward to hearing from two of our candidates for mayor today. They are seeking to serve us as a community and to lead. If elected they will be given places of honour; the top table at functions. They receive that honour because they have first stepped up to serve. They will lead us in welcoming people to the table in our city – in housing, and transport and climate issues, and the way our city is designed. Urban planning can be inclusive of everyone, especially pedestrians, or it can only focus on cars. Street design these days is all about community – or so the best urban planners would have it. Who gets prioritised at the planning table is something a Mayor can influence.

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews says: “do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” The writer is referring to the time when Sarah and Abraham hosted 3 strangers to lunch (Genesis 18) – they told them they would have a child – Sarah laughed and said – don’t be silly I am too old. But the angels were right. You never know what might happen when you offer hospitality, at a meal, or at the Council table.

³ <http://tekareongawai.org/talanoa/2016/8/23/big-hearted-people>

We gather around a table every week. A table with no name places, no hierarchy, where all are welcome, all are given places of honour. What do we learn at this table? What are we sent out to do? Who might we welcome and say – friend, move up higher, take my place, let me serve you.