The splinter at the back of your mind
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Hebrews 13:1-8,15-16, Luke 14: 1, 7-14
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Great art does not distract us from this world. Great art is not about escaping into a different reality, where we are free from the challenges of the real world. Rather great art helps us to see the world in new ways. I begin with this particular thought today because of a recent discussion where someone told me about the guilt they feel for limiting the amount of news they engage with from day to day. Many of us struggle with feelings of being overwhelmed by politics, wars, homelessness, environmental crisis, to name but a few challenging issues. It is not unreasonable to want to take a breather and to reduce our ever-growing anxiety about such things. And yes, sometimes that process of stepping back, or what we might call a tactical retreat, can come with feelings of guilt, because let's face it, if we don't do something about the state of this world, who will?

Since handing in my thesis a few weeks ago I've rediscovered something that at its worst could be described as escapism. I've started reading fiction again. And I've managed to watch some television, and like the person I was speaking to, I made the choice to limit how much news I was consuming. But what I have noticed, is that rather than caring less about our world, I find that I am beginning to care more, because as already suggested, great art helps to see the world in new ways.

For example, the new Superman movie. Really? You might wonder. How does a fictional superhero film that holds no interest to me at all, say something about our world? Well, it's by no means a great of piece of art, and its messages may not be perfectly articulated, and yet this movie is clearly saying something about Israel/Palestine, and the need to address the issue of genocide. My point here is simple, art forms that could be called escapist are often making social commentary. So called popcorn movies often have an agenda, or a point of view, on issues in the real

world. That is because film makers are often trying to share their point of view. So called fictional stories can be a way of exploring difficult topics in a non-confrontational way. I could give many more examples, but ultimately searching for meaning in different forms of art is something for each of us to explore.

This week there is a particular quote from a fictional movie that was rattling round my head. It goes like this, “What you know you can’t explain, but you feel it. You’ve felt it your entire life, that there’s something wrong with the world. You don't know what it is, but it’s there, like a splinter in your mind, driving you mad.”[1]

You may or may not recognise that quote, it doesn’t really matter what film it came from, it is simply a quote worth pondering. Deep down do you have a feeling that there is something wrong with the world? Do you struggle to put that feeling into words? Because I do have that feeling, and not being able to put it into words is particularly frustrating especially when part of your job is to talk about things. That splinter—that persistent sense of something being fundamentally wrong—might be our recognition that we're living in systems designed to fail most people while convincing us that they are fair.

For me part of the feeling is knowing that many of the systems of the world, systems that we are all part of, are failing to serve all of humanity. For example, one of the most insidious systems, a system that tells us what is fair and what is not, that shapes all of our lives, and is incredibly challenging to imagine alternatives to, goes by the name of capitalism. Capitalism tells us that life is fair, that each of us has the opportunity to make a good life for ourselves. But that is not true, because it assumes that life is an even playing field, which it is not. Some in this life and born into privilege and opportunity, whereas others are not. Some are born into poverty or trauma, and will never thrive in a system built on competition. Because what capitalism promises is that all will succeed, when in reality, in order to be winners, under capitalism others have to lose.

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[1] Morpheus: from *The Matrix*.

When Jesus spoke about banquets, and who should be invited and who should not, he was offering a critique of one of the systems in his society that created inequality. Like capitalism today, the imperial system of patronage in the time of Jesus was one that maintained social order by keeping some people at the top of the hierarchy, while the majority were at the bottom. Patronage was often demonstrated through those of greater wealth and influence sharing a banquet with those of less wealth and influence. The purpose of such meals was to create a sense of indebtedness to those who were further up the pecking order. Essentially hospitality became weaponised, by the wealthy lavishing great feasts upon poorer people who were then expected to reciprocate. Those who were poorer would typically try to reciprocate in order to improve their social position.

By suggesting that when sharing a meal, people should invite those who are not able to offer reciprocal hospitality, Jesus is not talking about acts of charity. Jesus is calling his followers to destabilise the systems of empire, by abandoning notions of reciprocity for social advancement.

Many of you will have heard sermons on how this Gospel passage is a call to be more generous to those less fortunate than ourselves. I am not convinced that this was what Jesus had in mind at all. John Dominic Crossan tells us that the lessons Jesus shared around the sharing of food and hospitality all conveyed a far deeper meaning than acts of charity. Crossan believes that the table of Jesus was always a metaphor for our world and how our world should really function. By gathering with anyone and everyone, by taking bread, blessing it, breaking it and sharing it, Jesus was presenting an alternative to the imperial model of I'll scratch your back if you scratch mine. At the table of Jesus, all are welcome, and all receive what they need.

At our recent Diocesan Ministry Conference, Sam Wells our visiting presenter challenged us to go even further in reimagining the kind of community Jesus was modelling for us. Having spent much of his ministry advocating on behalf of vulnerable people, Sam came to understand that a better approach was to work with vulnerable people. Many of us have made such a transition in our thinking about advocacy.

But Sam has moved to an even more radical position, suggesting that the parables of Jesus, where Jesus tells us to invite the vulnerable to a place at the table, are not about advocacy at all.

Sam helped us to see that even our best advocacy efforts can inadvertently perpetuate the very systems Jesus was trying to dismantle. When we work ***for*** others, we maintain hierarchy. When we work ***with*** others, we're still operating within frameworks of reciprocal exchange. But when we simply ***be with*** others we embody the radical equality that makes such systems irrelevant.

Sam suggested that Jesus is telling us as a community that our first and highest priority is simply to ***be with*** people. No matter who they are or what their life experience is. When he said this, I couldn't help but think of Linda's challenge to us a few weeks ago, that perhaps we need to shift our thinking away from the homeless, and towards how we support human beings living with significant trauma.

Jesus goes further than upsetting the system of patronage. Jesus suggests the practice of radical equality where all members of the community share their humanity with each other. To put that more bluntly, Jesus suggests that the kingdom of heaven is a place where there is no inequality, no division, no exclusion. And the challenge for us is to live our life as a community as if that were true. That we are so convinced that love upholds the worth and dignity of all people, that we live each day upholding the worth and dignity of each person. Transformation of the world's problems begins with every little choice we make to be kind, appreciative, and loving towards each other. Because if we can't do that within this community, what hope do we have to offer the wider world?

This altar, this table, that we gather around every Sunday, is supposed to remind us that this world can be a place where all are welcome, all are fed, and all belong. There are no barriers to participation in the meal of communion. There is only welcome. It is a symbolic meal, that is intended to inspire each of us to live in ways that affirm the belief, that all are welcome, all are fed, and all belong. So come and share the communion meal, but if you do, the challenge is to live communion, to live inclusion, and to live as a truly welcoming community every day. Amen.