

Sermon Archive 259

Sunday 1 September, 2019

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Luke 14: 1, 7-14

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



One of the things I'd been told when first exploring the culture of the Presbyterian Church, was that we were Christendom's egalitarians. Presbyterians didn't have a separate priestly caste of person - our ministers were ordinary people into whom the community simply had poured a bit of extra education so they could be teaching elders, alongside the ruling elders. No princes of the church here - just fellow subjects of the Church's Sovereign. And among the ministers there was a complete equality. One minister could be serving near the marina, with lovely sea views. Another could be serving by the tagging on the roller doors on the shop fronts - but both were on the standard stipend - being paid the same amount. We were equal. I believed this entirely, until I received a letter from a senior colleague. Having written a letter to him, requesting a document from him, his letter to me (with the document enclosed) read: "Dear Matthew Jack. I hope that as you mature somewhat in ministry, you will learn proper respect for your elders." Slam-dunked was I, into the naughty corner, to think a while about equality.

Another colleague, someone more my contemporary, was appointed to be a chaplain in the New Zealand Army. I remember the first time I saw her in army fatigues, and thinking "Gosh, this is a culture shift - you look less like a minister (whatever that means) and more like a soldier - dressed for battle. She told me that she had the rank of "Major", which kind of impressed me - that a servant of Jesus would operate that high within the military structure. She assured me that being a Major wasn't all that important - although it did affect the pay scale, and brought with it some benefits in terms of rights to a pension. Eventually, after having raised some questions about the behaviour of someone of higher rank than Major, she was squeezed out of the army. Sometimes that happens within a chain of command. The chain gives; the chain takes away. Blessed be the name of the chain.

Another colleague informed me that the Navy had a much more creative approach to chaplaincy and rank. Navy chaplains didn't carry a rank - but were considered to be the same rank as anyone with whom they were speaking. Speaking to a sailor recruit, the chaplain was a sailor recruit. Speaking to an admiral, the chaplain was an admiral. I quite liked that idea - and made sure I never asked about what navy chaplains received in the way of salary - how a chaplain's salary was linked to that of other ranks (because sometimes behind the public rhetoric of equality, the money sometimes says something different). A few years now have passed. My colleague retired from the Navy, and went back into parish ministry. This morning he's breaking bread with a comfortable congregation in Hawkes Bay (and probably dealing with Jesus' teaching on people positioning themselves around the table). Argy bargy, dancing around the seats of honour, rising and falling amid the promotion and demotion. Who does what for whom? Working out where we stand or sit.

It seems to me that ex-European Kiwi culture is one of the cultures that prides itself on being egalitarian. (One of the others is that other culture which felt a need to say in its constitution that "all [men] are created equal" - while it also practised slavery.) Our culture never enshrined equality in a constitution - but we've made a lot of noise about having left the old class system behind on the far side of the sea. We were the first nation to give a vote to women as well as to men - for we're all equal. We call our Prime minister by her first name - for we're all equal. Some of us decline Queen's honours with titles attached - for we're all equal. And for those of us who forget that we're all equal, and who stumble from the ways of proper Kiwi-self-deprecation, we have the tall poppy chopper. We nourish the fantasy that we all are equal. I call it a "fantasy", because in socio-economic terms there is no even playing field between a baby born to a leaky home and a baby born to an Omaha beach house. It's a fantasy because, all our egalitarian posing aside, we know, as Jesus speaks about invitation lists and seats of honour, exactly what he means. Even in without caste systems and class systems, there are useful connections. There are strategic relationships, and people best avoided. The status and social power of others is something we notice. It is real.

I have found "interesting" the recent reporting around the case of Jeffrey

Epstein. There's old footage (1992) of him and Donald Trump at a party. 28 young women had been invited to dance for something called a "calendar girl competition". The footage has the two men smiling. The one in the rather-too-long tie is patting the other one on the back. A quote from that time has one saying of the other "'I've known Jeff for 15 years. Terrific guy. He's a lot of fun to be with. It is even said that he likes beautiful women as much as I do, and many of them are on the younger side."

Alan Dershowitz, long-time law professor at Harvard, said "In those days, if you didn't know Trump and you didn't know Epstein, you were a nobody."

A second film clip has Prince Andrew, the Duke of York, waving someone goodbye from an Epstein doorway, smiling through the gap. The suggestion is made that he's enjoyed fringe benefits from an Epstein friendship.

Now that Jeffrey Epstein has ceased to be a wealthy hedge fund manager, taking on instead the role of a suicided prisoner facing charges of underage sex-trafficking, Donald Trump says "I haven't seen him for years. I'm not a fan". In *his* statement, Prince Andrew says "During the time I knew him, I saw him infrequently and probably no more than only once or twice a year."

There are people you *do* want at your table. And there are people you *don't*. When people are transitioning from wanted to unwanted, we're quick to edit the invitation list. Yes, we *know* the world that Jesus describes in his parable about the table.

The table's used as a symbol for how we use one another - how we position ourselves among others for our own advancement, or sometimes protection. And Jesus warns us that this kind of table game is dangerous.

But then he talks about using the table in a completely different way. Don't worry about how you fit there, and where you will sit. Don't worry about the presence and position of those who are only there to make you look good. Don't use the table like that. Don't use people like that. Use

the table for a different kind of banquet.

“When you give a banquet”, he says, “invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you”.

Meeting people without a thought of getting anything back. Meeting people with no concern about what others think and how you’re being judged. Meeting people for *their* sake, not your own. Meeting people, and knowing that it’s the meeting itself that’s important - being in that moment, rather than in some other moment of calculation or social anxiety. We are here, at the table, because we both eat, and we’re both hungry, and God has given us food enough to share. It’s not a transaction. It’s not a forward investment. It’s passing around the food *as if* all are welcome - because all actually *are*. We need to find a way of sharing our food that says exactly that.

So Jesus had started telling a story about status and social anxiety. He ends up making a point about a universal welcome. His point is about who, underneath all the excrement, we really are. We are people invited to a table. We are people included in a blessing. We are all non-paying guests of the generous host. Life makes its distinctions, but at Jesus’ table, each one is offered an honourable place.

-ooOoo-

Dear Matthew Jack; as you mature somewhat in ministry, grow up and learn your place. Dear Major, time for you to go, says the General. Thanks for the pension, says the chaplain, sitting in the officers’ mess. “I never knew Mr Epstein”, say O so many. Jesus says “invite those who can’t pay you back - you will be blessed”. We’re all blessed guests of the host. Love bids us come.

A moment of quiet.

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