

Wednesday 24th May Session IV

Introit: *For the beauty of the earth* (John Rutter)
South Morningside Primary School Choir

Hymn: Psalm 23 (CH4 15) The Lord's my Shepherd *Orlington*

Prayer

Let us pray
Lord of the lost ones,
You come to our broken homes
And call us Your own:
May our tables be graced
By Your presence as guest
And our possessions freed
To serve the poor and the rich,
For all are welcome, and all have need.
Forgive us, hospitable Lord,
When we turn the places we live and work and worship into
fortresses,
And our hearts into locked-in love.
Your generous example presents to us a key of hope.
Come, unlock the goodness in our lives,
Enable us to be greater than the potential
You have embedded in our lives.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord,
Who taught us when we pray together to say:
Our Father
Which art in Heaven
Hallowed be Thy Name.
Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth
As it is in Heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,

But deliver us from evil.
For Thine is the Kingdom, the power and the glory.
Forever.
Amen

Reading: Luke 19:1-10

Beth McGauley, Claudia Hueso, and Sara Burns

Reflection: Word of Life – Hospitality

Luke 19:1-10

When I arrived in Morningside I had the pleasure of meeting those magnificent creatures, the Morningside ladies. Far from being the fur-coated matrons of myth all sounding like a certain Miss Jean Brodie in her prime (though we have a few) these wonderful women provide much of the heart and soul of my parish, and along with the men, provide a significant amount of hospitality.

I remember my first encounter – when they asked me about the social that was to follow my induction. “How do you feel about wine, Dr Browning?” “It depends on the vintage” – was the correct answer. “And what about the purvey?” that lovely old word still in use to describe the food for the evening. “We’re not a sausage roll kind of congregation, you know.”

Ambrose Bierce defines in his sardonic book, *The Devil’s Dictionary* the word hospitality:

Hospitality, noun. The virtue which induces us to feed and lodge certain persons who are not in need of food and lodging.

The definition is between two other words – Hope and Hostility.

Christianity can be defined in many ways, but for me one of the most significant is ‘hospitality’. “Christianity’s default position is hospitality, even as we received hospitality on the cross of Christ.” We are ‘prejudiced towards hospitality, because that’s the way God treated us, and how we are supposed to treat others.’ⁱ

It is interesting to compare Zacchaeus with blind Bartimaeus who lived on the other side of Jericho. One was wealthy and the other a blind beggar, but both lived on the margins of Jewish religious life. Neither was able to see Jesus, but Jesus stopped to notice them. Both were fit for salvation, and welcome. If we stopped to look and see – who might catch our attention – and would we welcome them?

Even more for Zacchaeus, before he had even decided to turn his life around, Jesus gate-crashed his home. “Zacchaeus, make haste and come down; for I must stay at your house today.” It is one of the many astonishing moments in the Bible. This radical assertion, as Desmond Tutu said in this very Assembly Hall in his electric address in 2009, this *radical* assertion that all will be embraced by God. That in the family of God, all find a place at the table; that there are no outsiders any more. Jesus doesn’t wait for Zacchaeus to sort his life out, Jesus merely gate-crashes the little man’s home. Nobody on the outside, everybody on the inside. All means all. The people we like, the people we don’t like. Different colour of skin. Different lifestyle choices. Different genders. Different ages. Different faith traditions? Zacchaeus was a Jew. So was Jesus. And all those other people, broken and bad, welcomed in by our generous Lord.

Who is at the table in the life of faith? Who is kept away, and why? Where is the radical welcome? Who is at the table of

society, and who is kept away, and why? In the hospitality Jesus showed towards Zacchaeus, what are we being told about our Church and our community? The former Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has written:

“In thinking about religion and society in the 21st century, we should broaden the conversation about faith from doctrinal debates to the larger question of how it might inspire us to strengthen the bonds of belonging that redeem us from our solitude, helping us to construct together a gracious and generous social order.”

Who are in the sycamore trees around our cities, towns and villages just waiting, waiting to be called down, and invited in? None so broken they can't be mended. None so wicked they can't be forgiven. None so sick they can't be healed. None so lost they can't be found. None so unable to keep their promises that they can't be given another chance. None so unclean on the inside that they can't be purified. None so narrow-minded that they can't be enlightened. None so stuck

in their ways that they can't be moved. None so hard-hearted that they can't be softened. None so invisible that they can't be seen.

Hospitality in the name of Christ is more than a slogan about 'inclusiveness' and more than a warm welcome. Christian love is love in action; it is a move to incorporate. The American theologian Will Willimon writes, "The 'friendly church' is often a congregation that puts so much into 'us' that little room is left for welcoming 'them'."ⁱⁱ

The story of Zacchaeus is a little story, no pun intended, but its shattering implications for who we welcome and how we welcome and why we welcome speaks to every theological persuasion of our rainbow church. This challenge affects equally the conservative and the liberal; the traditionalist and the progressive. This story of hospitality reveals to us the heart and the practice of God, it is a hermeneutic of hospitality that makes us look again at this perplexing Jesus. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, body and strength, and

love your neighbour as yourself. There's Jesus, there's Zacchaeus, putting it all into practice before our very eyes.

A true story is told of a Presbyterian Church in Georgia when a man in shabby clothes ambled in during a Sunday service. Everybody looked at him and made up their minds that he probably wasn't up to much good. Everyone knew that he wasn't one of them. The Church members stepped aside as the stranger entered. He sat by himself in a pew towards the rear. Everyone cast nervous glances in his direction, wondering if he would disrupt their worship. When the offering plates went round everyone half-expected him to help himself. At the close of the service the man arose and quietly departed. After the service the Church people stood under the big oak in the church grounds, talking in serious and muted tones. They probably didn't know how to say it, but everyone knew that God had put their Church to the test. And everyone knew they had failed.

God is always on the move beyond the boundaries of what we think is acceptable or right or comfortable. At the table of God's love, there is room enough for everyone. It might remind you of something Desmond Tutu has said: *"We may be surprised at the people we find in heaven. God has a soft spot for sinners. His standards are quite low."*

Just as well – or we might find ourselves up sycamore trees too – straining to catch a glimpse of Jesus – never expecting that one day – the Son of God might gently elbow his way into our homes, and our hearts.

Hospitality, a word of life. "Make haste and come down; for I must stay at your house today."

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

Prayer (including Prayer of Constitution)

Let us pray.

Open-handed, open hearted God,
Passionately indiscriminate in Your love,
Recklessly generous to Your children,
How we should praise and marvel at all You have done.
In the richness of the created order,
Evolving over millennia into the beauty we call Earth;
In the intricacies of colour and texture
Woven into the tapestry of life.
In the exotic and the staple provision
Of things to eat and drink
That reveal Your banquet of lavish hospitality.
We hold back, You advance;
We hoard, You give all You have.
For those times when we exclude
From the openness of Your welcome – forgive.
For those times when we narrow
The breadth of Your inclusion – forgive.
And for those times when we remember
The nature of our faith and our God,
And give without counting the cost or expecting a return
We thank You with grateful hearts today.
In a world blessed with abundance,
Challenge each one of us to share more readily.
In the inward meanness of so much politics,
May those engaged in the public square of decision-making
Remember the greater good, and the commonwealth of
humanity.
Where one hungering means all are hungry,
Where one excluded means all are bereft.
Complete the gaps at the tables of our faith
With those whose needs are often no more and no less
Than our own.
For food and drink;

For shelter and warmth;
For acceptance and mercy;
For love and being named.
Bless the length and breadth and depth and height
Of our nation and world,
And all that is within it.
God save our Queen, and challenge our nation.
Be close to Her Grace this day, and all that she will do,
And bless this General Assembly in our thought and speech
and action,
As now we constitute ourselves a court of Christ's Church,
For this we ask in His Name and for His sake,
The host and guest,
The image of God reflected in us.
Amen.

Hymn: CH4 714 Gather us in, thou Love that fillest all!
Gather Us In

ⁱ William H Willimon, Fear of the Other, p7

ⁱⁱ ibid pps 77-78