



A sermon preached at
St Andrew's Parish Church, Headington

By Rev Dr Tim Howles

Reading: Luke 14:7-14

In order to make sense of that reading from the Gospel of Luke, I think first of all we have to understand something about the context in which it was set.

The world in which Jesus lived, the Greco-Roman world, operated by means of a *patronage* system. Actually, I don't think this is too difficult to grasp, because many societies today still operate along these lines.

In every community there were certain wealthy and prominent individuals. And if you wanted to improve your station in life, to gain status and prestige, to "move up" the ladder, as it were, you had to make one of these people your patron.

How did it work? Well, you entered into a form of contract:

- First, the patron would do something for you. He would smooth your way: give you loans, provide you with favours, send business opportunities in your direction, etc.
- And in return, you would owe something back to him. And so to be a patron in that society was to enjoy power, prestige and influence, because you would have a network of people at your disposal who were dependent on you for their status and livelihoods.

And that is the context in which Luke chapter 14 is set. For here is a dinner-party. But not just any old dinner-party. For this event (and others like it) would have been a hub of patronage activity. By participating in a dinner like this, you were engaging in that game: meeting influential people, trying to give or receive something, jostling for position with others, trying to get "up the ladder".

Here's how the biblical scholar Richard Hays describes it: "where you sat in the pecking order determined every aspect of your life in the ancient world—your work,

your income, with whom you could intermarry—and the places around a meal, nearer or further from your host, were a tangible expression of this status.”

So that’s what we have going on here.

But look what happens next...

In the middle of this meal, Jesus stands up and says:

When you give a lunch or a 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. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. Then you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you.
(v.12-14)

What’s Jesus saying here? Is he saying that, when we host a party, we should never invite our friends? No! (in fact, I’m 100% sure Jesus was not saying that!) Nor was he saying that you should never have good contacts in business, or try to get ahead in life, or anything like that. This is a type of idiom. He’s saying: *those who follow me are not to live their lives by means of patronage and jostling for position; rather, they are to be characterised by acts of radical generosity and service to others. If you do that, then the world will see something of the kingdom of God.*

I think it’s true to say that this was one of the distinguishing features of the early Church. In fact, there’s quite a bit of evidence to suggest that.

For example, a letter has come down to us, probably written in the late second-century AD, known as the Epistle to Diognetus. In it, the writer says this about the behaviour of Christians:

They live in both Greek and barbarian cities, and follow the local customs in dress and food and other aspects of life as is their lot in life. But at the same time they demonstrate the remarkable and unusual character of their citizenship. [...] They are poor, yet they make many rich; they are in need of everything, yet they abound in everything.

Or to take another example, in the fourth-century the Christian writer Lactantius wrote that there was something special about churches and Christian communities. He says: “slaves are not slaves to us, rather we deem them brothers and fellow-servants alongside the rest”.

Many other examples could be cited. But can you see: these first followers of Jesus were radically counter-cultural. Somehow, their community was not defined by patronage, by favours, by currying influence. They lived in a different way, characterised by generosity, self-sacrifice, the advancement of the interests of others, and especially a welcome to those who were considered socially outcast.

Can you imagine how beautiful that must have been?

I wonder if we could live in the same way here at St Andrew's?

I think there's much we do well; I really do. But, like any church, I'm sure there's also space for us to think more carefully about what we're doing. Let me give you some concrete and practical thoughts (and you can take-or-leave these as you wish):

- Do we sometimes worry more about how we look (the flowers, the table-cloths), than about what we're doing?
- What about the way we welcome people here? I think we do that really well. But could we do it even better? Are we sending out signals to certain groups of people that they can only really belong here if they first conform to the way we do things?
- Or what about our lives outside church? Are we only mixing with those who make us feel happy, secure and affirmed? Or are we seeking out others too? What about the person who comes through that door looking lonely, vulnerable, difficult? The person you glance at and think: *that looks like hard work!* How are we reaching out to them? Is there one person here who you haven't got to know much: could that be someone you could intentionally get alongside over the next few weeks?

These are issues that all churches face. And how we respond is a matter of wisdom for you, given your circumstances in life.

But Jesus calls us to become a radically counter-cultural community, one that does not function according to the principles of world (getting what we need from others), but one where generosity overflows in abundance, especially to those who find themselves most marginalised by the culture.

Boy, that's not easy to do in practice!

And so, just as we finish, let me leave you with a motivation.

The reason Christians can find the power to live this way is that we know what it means to be on the receiving-end of precisely that sort of generosity.

At the heart of the Christian faith is the idea that we once were lonely and outcast; we once were far from the centre of things; we once we estranged from the God who made us. But the Gospel tells us that God did not leave us abandoned. He sent His only Son, Jesus Christ into the world. And He who was infinitely rich became poor for our sakes, dying on the cross, so that we could be raised up. To be a Christian is to know that we have been invited to feast at the table of the Lord, not because we deserved it, but as a free gift, with no strings attached. “It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God” (Eph 2:8-9). When we understand that, when we really understand the height and the depth and the breadth of what Christ has done for us, how can we not calibrate every part of our lives to share that same opportunity with others?

That is the motivation that enables us to live that way. Nothing else in the whole world can get close.

Let me leave you with this brief story. One morning in 2002, the American journalist Sara Miles was walking in her home city of San Francisco. She stopped outside the church of St Gregory of Nyssa in the city-centre. And although she was an atheist, something inexplicably drew her in. In her book, *Take this Bread: A Radical Conversion*, she tells the story:

I went in and took my first communion. I don't know why I did it; it made no sense. But suddenly I found myself in tears. I was eating a piece of bread. And in that bread, the reality of what Christ had done struck home. He had died for me. And now he was inviting me to join Him at His own table, pardoned, forgiven, free. I showed up, undeserving and needy. And all I needed to do was open my arms and accept from Him. What generosity was this? I knew life could never be the same again.

Sara set up a café service for the homeless in her part of the city, known as the “food pantry”. It still functions today, feeding over 400 families every week.

It is only when know the radical generosity of Christ that we will have the power to go out and live lives of humility, sacrifice and service to others.

“For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted”.

Sermon preached on Sunday 01 September 2019, the Eleventh Sunday of Trinity