

Turn from exclusive hierarchies and welcome outsiders

Rev'd Peter Balabanski

Pentecost + 12 C – Heb 13 1-8, 15-16 and Lk 14 1, 7-14

Hossein's Story

Some of our refugee friends, when released from Inverbrackie, were put in a different suburb from other family members. Two of their adult boys went to live near Marion but the rest of the family was placed in Elizabeth. Hossein, the Dad, told me how, after visiting the boys, he and Mum and their daughter had their first hair-raising experience of taking public transport to get home on their own. They got off the Elizabeth bus one stop too early, and they had no idea where they were.

But at the bus stop, Hossein told me there was a *poor man*. He saw they were in trouble and offered to help them. He guided them to their home. Hossein is sure this man was Jesus. He reminded me of a Bible study we'd done at Inverbrackie where we'd read that sometimes you might meet an angel or Jesus without knowing it. Hossein had remembered that Bible study.

Their daughter told me later that the *poor man* was Aboriginal. I smile to think that a member of the first people in this country was the one who guided some of the most recent people in this country safely to their home, here.

Jesus noticed how the guests chose the places of honour at the table. ^{Lk 14.7} Jesus gives us today's parable because he sees people trying to grab honour. The Mediterranean honour/shame system is something we have to know about if we are to make sense of this parable of Jesus. (*Kids in the Servis-Taxi story*

if time permit)

In Mediterranean society, the greatest treasure of all is honour. (Patron / client, honour / shame, limited goods exchange system) A host has lots of honour and guests receive some of that honour by being invited to the meal. But any guest who can make it look like their relationship with the host is closer than other people's, they'll leave that meal with a tiny bit more apparent honour than the other guests. That's what Jesus saw people trying to do – take more honourable seats than they should have. In our culture, we'd say they're like social climbers, climbing over other people to get to the top.

Jesus watched this little game being acted out, and in that wonderfully embarrassing way of his, he did what a guest should never do if he wanted another invitation. Jesus said out loud exactly what he saw happening. He did it by telling a parable. His parable taught that honour is not something you can steal; it's not really even something you can earn. It's something you are given. *When your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will be honoured in the presence of all who sit at the table with you.* ^{Lk 14.10b} The parable says that the host gives honour to the guests; it's a gift, not a market commodity to be seized and hoarded.

Artificial hierarchies and the accumulation of goods are anathema to the Kingdom of God. Think back to Mary's song – ^{Lk 1.52} *He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;* ⁵³ *He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.* At the end of today's parable, Jesus reminds us of that great reversal his mother prophesied; he says ... *all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.*

Jesus doesn't stop with unmasking the social climbing game. He calls his host to embrace God's reversal; to live Kingdom life

now. That call was pretty well impossible for his host to hear. When Jesus demanded of his host that he open his table to God's little ones—the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind, the man must have been appalled. No Pharisee could invite *them* in; they were all ritually unclean. To associate with them would disqualify everyone in the room from temple worship. But we know something this Pharisee doesn't; that Jesus emptied himself of honour for our sake, and we have committed ourselves to following Jesus on this path.

So we leave that baffled Pharisee there, and we come to ourselves. I don't think this is the sort of teaching we can respond to as individuals. With his call to invite outsiders, Jesus challenged something that had to do with a whole society; the sorts of habits and customs a society sets up to keep its boundaries safe.

Boundaries are things to keep outsiders at bay – people who are different – and boundaries are also designed to keep insiders in line. This parable and Jesus' application of it challenges our society's boundaries. He challenges every Christian community like he did Luke's community. Jesus' parable taught that honour can only be received as a free gift, like everything else that God has given. Jesus applied his parable by making it a call to turn from exclusive hierarchies and to welcome outsiders with a hospitality usually reserved for close friends.

On this day of prayer for refugees, more than 100,000,000 of them, it's going to take the whole Church of God to solve the crisis. We must **all** recognise that God's grace is not just for us, but for everyone – recognise it and live it out. We can do our bit and support charities who help refugees. But even the UNHCR is helpless before the challenge we face. It needs the whole Church of God to tackle this. And the question is, how do we get this movement happening. The whole Church knows what Jesus wants from us. So how do we here start to get things moving? Amen.