

Who has the best seat in the house?

We can all be a little particular about where we sit. For instance, we all know there is something wrong with the first row of seats in church. No one ever wants to sit in that row! So, I love the people that come and sit down the front.

Possibly we choose a seat in church because we need to be near the front to see the screen or hear better. Perhaps we sing in the choir so we sit at the back near the piano? Perhaps we sit on one side or the other to avoid the sun shining in the window? Perhaps...it's just habit?

Some years ago, Wesley East Doncaster joined together with Deep Creek. I remember that first Sunday vividly. To begin with, all the well-dressed Wesley people turned up 20 minutes early. They sat down on the left side of the church, nearest where they entered. Sometime later, the Deep Creek people started arrive, by comparison fairly casually dressed. They had to go and sit on the right-hand side of the church, no matter where they usually sat. I suspect some people were quite put out that someone else was sitting in their seat! No doubt something similar happened when we our four churches came together and we started to attend worship in different places or have other people come to OUR church!

Indeed, someone who shall remain nameless told me the first time they attended Westfield Drive they sat down. And then they were politely told they were sitting in the choir seats!

So, let me ask you, hands up, "Are you sitting where you always sit?"

Sometimes we may go to a formal dinner or a wedding or special birthday where the most important people are seated at the 'top' table. I bet we all remember wrestling with the seating plan for the wedding.

Sometimes we jealously watch the Australian Open tennis or the Melbourne Cup and see the celebrities enjoying in the best seats in the house. And we might think, what did they do to get such great seats?

In Jesus' time, group meals or communal meals were an important community event. Among the rules for common meals of this kind was the correct order of seating. There was a place for the most important and the least important and everyone in between. We might smile at people who always insist on sitting in the same seats in church. But in the ancient world, place was guarded even more jealously. Most to be feared was losing your place, to be embarrassed, to be publicly humiliated by having to take a lower place.

(Lindsay tells a story) Thank you for your story, Lindsay, and fortunately we can laugh at the story with you because you never sought the place of honour in the first place.

Luke's writing suggests that Jesus has a complex relationship with the Pharisees. Although the Pharisees may be in dispute with Jesus and sometimes express hostility toward him, Jesus continues to engage and dine with them.

Today's story is the third dinner invitation recorded in Luke.

1. In Luke 7:36-50, Luke tells of a "woman who was a sinner" coming into the house and bathing Jesus' feet with her tears, before anointing his feet with the ointment she had brought (an alabaster jar of ointment). It was after

this that Jesus told the story of the two debtors. And you will remember his rebuke to Simon,

Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. ⁴⁵You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. ⁴⁶You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. ⁴⁷Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.”
And he said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

2. On the second occasion (Luke 11:37-43), we hear

...the pharisee was amazed to see that he did not first wash before dinner

Jesus chides him for ritually cleaning the outside but being full of greed and wickedness inside. He accuses the Pharisees hypocrisy.

...you love to have the seat of honour in the synagogues and to be greeted with respect in the marketplace...(but) you are like unmarked graves and people walk over them without realising it.

3. Luke 14:7–14) is the third dinner invitation Jesus accepts from a Pharisee.

This was a Sabbath celebration, a big dinner with a significant number of guests. But in fact, it's all about where to sit.

Jesus stands back and observes the behaviour of the dinner guests. He observes them scrambling for front row seats closest to the host – in the VIP section so to speak. When he notices how the guests choose the places of honour, he tells them a parable.

The first part of the parable consists of three episodes around this issue of where you sit at a banquet.

Episode 1:

The first episode is what you should not do. Do not sit at the place of honour in case someone more distinguished comes.

Episode 2:

The second part has the same structure but in this case the recommendation is what you should do

...sit down at the lowest place so that when your host comes, he may say friend move up higher.

Episode 3:

The finale of all these recommendations about where to sit at a banquet is the point of this parable:

All who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

The second part of this story is the recommendations to the host about who to invite to dinner

When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite...but when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind”.

The teaching then follows:

You will be blessed because they cannot repay you. It will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.

Rev Tom Boomershine says,

The dynamic of the interaction between religion and honour or striving for honour and trying to move oneself up the ranks of honour, either at work or in the context of religious communities, happens in virtually every institution.

There are ongoing and indirect contests going on about who will be higher in the rankings of the community. The basic message is that there will be a sorting of those who are humble and those who exalt themselves.

Bill Loader comments,

In the ancient world, place was guarded by most even more jealously than today. Society was strongly hierarchical. There was a place on the ladder. For many it was a matter of survival to make sure they either stayed where they were or climbed higher. Position was not just a matter of individual achievement. It was a community value. It was in some sense given by the group. Your value was inseparable from what others thought about you. Most to be feared was to lose your place, to be embarrassed.

There are many times in the Old and New Testaments when similar sentiments are expressed.

In Proverbs 25:6-7 it says

Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence or stand in the place of the great; for it is better to be told, 'Come up here,' than to be put lower in the presence of a noble.

The rich young ruler (Matthew 19:30)

Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first

Labourers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:16)

So the last will be first and first will be last

Jesus denounces the scribes and the Pharisees (Matthew 23:12)

All who exalt themselves will be humbled and all who humble themselves will be exalted

And in the letter of James (James 4:10)

Humble yourselves before the lord, and he will lift you up

Thus, Jesus is repeating a common wisdom. But as always, there is a twist, turning our attention from issues of status and temporal power to issues of

the ultimate. “When you give a luncheon 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.”

Real reward lies in this:

...when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.

Tom Boomershine says,

The idea that we should invite to dinner the poor, the crippled, the lame and blind is something that, as far as I can identify, almost nobody does in obedience to Jesus' teaching.

Is it true that invitations to dinner among Christian communities are not significantly different than what happens in the rest of society?

There are agencies of the Church which have historically cared for people and supported the lame, the crippled and the blind. Hospitals that have been established by the church often provided this sort of care. But in today's world, many of the Church's hospitals have been taken over by for-profit companies which have not continued the work in the same way. Because they only provide a service to those who can pay.

Was the 'place at the table' in the ancient world so different from our own?

Today we have Facebook, Twitter, the Social Pages, School Cliques, Church Council, Portfolios.

They may all manifest a desire for significance and recognition.

We all want to feel wanted, to be valued and to have some significance.

But is it all about being on top and staying there?

Andrew Prior suggests,

We all want to be on top, and to be safe. A major aspect of “gate keeping” and “blocking” behaviours in church, and of resistance to change, is the fear of losing our place at the table. And so we climb, to make sure we are near the top where we can best look after our own interests. The great danger is that we will be so busy looking after our place at the table, and maintaining our place in the world, that we find that we have missed the feast.

The gospel is an invitation to life, made from the premise that life's greatest reward is to live in love. It's not about holding our place at the table, it's not about getting the best seat in the house, it's about being ready to humble ourselves and honour those we meet.

AMEN

Chris Mitchell