

Responding to Luke 14 from within – trying a narrative sermon

It was a really special day – I'd been invited for Sabbath dinner by one of the Pharisees. Not just any old Pharisee you understand, one of the really prominent ones. This was a great honour. The Shabbat dinner – rich in symbolism as it pointed us to the Eternal Banquet in the Kingdom of God, the eschatological hope – to be invited to this was honour indeed. I wondered who else might be there – wealthy and influential people, that was for sure – and what the conversation might be about. I'd also heard that Jesus the Nazarene was invited, an intriguing choice, someone we all wanted a chance to talk with, to listen to, to question. Excited? Of course I was excited – how often did a mere woman get the chance to attend something like this? Granted, I would have to stay on the edge of the gathering, straining to hear what was said, not allowed to speak, but what an opportunity- I couldn't wait to tell my neighbours about it when I got back...

I set off in good time, walking the short distance to the Pharisee's home. As ever the streets were quiet except for the outcasts for whom Shabbat was irrelevant – those whose sickness, infirmity or choice of occupation excluded them from ritual cleanliness. Ahead of me were some legal experts and Pharisees chatting as they walked, and a few steps further on the man I recognised as Jesus. Standing on the edge of the road was a man with dropsy – his swollen limbs looked terribly painful. Poor fellow, I thought, all alone. The walkers stopped, and I overheard Jesus asking them a question about the Law – was it permissible to heal on Shabbat? They said nothing – and he reached out and touched the man who, apparently restored to health, went on his way.

Before I had time to think about this, to wonder at the marvel of what had happened, to think about questions of ritual cleanliness, Jesus was asking another question – if it was your child, or your donkey or your ox stuck in a well wouldn't you pull it out?

Nice one, I thought. Course you would. So if you'd rescue your donkey why not help a fellow human being... Better the day, better the deed. Hmm.

We entered the house and immediately some of the guests headed towards the honour seat, aiming to get as close as they could to it, so they could see and be seen.

Jesus stood back, a wry smile playing on his lips and he spoke – some say it was a parable or a riddle, but it seemed plain enough to me. *When someone invites you to a wedding feast, don't head for the place of honour because someone else might arrive who is more important and then you'll be forced to give up that seat and - horror of horrors – the only place left is the most lowly. Instead choose a lowly place and you might get moved up higher.*

Don't think too highly of yourself. That was pretty straightforward, surely... Then I began to smile quietly to myself – of course it was straight forward, but I was already thinking who else it applied to – that Pharisee with the snooty expression, the arrogant young scribe who thought he knew everything, the upwardly mobile women I met in the market... No, it was for me. Don't point the finger, I thought, hadn't I been thrilled to be invited to this meal, felt important, gloated just a little as I told my neighbours... even I, lowly as society told me I was, felt superior to others...

As I looked up, I saw Jesus turn to speak to the host, this prominent Pharisee who filled me with such awe, someone whose invitation I must now seek to return if honour was to be satisfied.

When you have a dinner or a lunch don't invite your family or your rich neighbours who will invite you back. Rather, when you host a banquet, invite poor people, those with physical disabilities, those who have no hope of repaying your hospitality. In doing that you will find real blessing.

I was amazed. I loved having my friends round for meals. Choosing the menu, making sure it was a little more adventurous than the last time, attending to all the details. And I loved visiting my relatives, catching up on news, sharing good home cooking, secretly checking out who was faring better in keeping up with the neighbours. Lunches and dinners – they were great social occasions made you feel good and earned you lots of favours. As for banquets...

And now this suggestion that I abandon my social whirl to welcome people who couldn't invite me back... Even people who were disabled – who might drop plates, or dribble when they ate, or not know how to behave in polite society or even smell a bit... This was incredible! And yet...

Did it somehow fit with what he'd already said? Don't think of yourself more highly than you should? Was there, maybe, some consistency in this topsy turvey tale?

We munched our way through the delicious meal laid before us. There was plenty for all and still food left over. The wine flowed freely and a general sense of well-being hung in the air. If this really was a foretaste of the Kingdom of God, then it promised to be something special.

As this thought crossed my mind, someone spoke it aloud: *blessed is the person who will eat at the feast in the Kingdom of God.*

Jesus paused for the briefest moment, then told another story.

A man was preparing a great banquet and sent invitations to many guests. When the time for the banquet came he sent out his servants to gather those he had invited. But they began to make excuses about why they couldn't come.

How rude, I thought, when you're invited to a banquet you go...

I've just bought a field, I need to go and inspect it. Please accept my apologies.

Well, I thought, it isn't every day you buy a new field, and who wouldn't want to go and look it over straight away...

Another said I've just bought five yoke of oxen and I need to try them out, please excuse me.

Seemed reasonable to me. I remembered the last time we'd had new oxen – the excitement of that first outing with them...

Still another said, I've just got married, so I can't come.

Well that was fair enough, surely...

The man was angry and sent out his servants to bring in people who were poor, who were physically disabled, who were visually impaired...

Well, I suppose it would be a shame to waste the banquet...

But there was still room at the banquet, and the servant was sent out into the narrow lanes and out beyond the town to gather in anyone they could find to join in. But those who had been invited would taste nothing.

That seemed a bit harsh to me; their reasons had all been valid hadn't they... Then I began to think back over the conversation that had flowed during the meal... the desire to be considered important enough to take a place of honour... the temptation to welcome only those people who would repay me in kind: the nice, clean, well spoken, polite people with money to buy food and drink... these were people with power and choices, people who could afford to buy land and property, people who could afford not just one but five yoke of oxen at a time, people who could have weddings...

I thought back to the man with dropsy who had been touched by Jesus and made whole. A man I had felt sorry for, but had not wanted to engage with. A man I was happy to pass by as I went on my way to share the food of a rich and powerful man. A man I would have overlooked in telling my neighbours about the day's events...

They call Jesus a friend of sinners. We all know that he's as happy to share table with tax collectors as he is to dine with Pharisees. We know that his friends include many undesirables, and yet we are enthralled by what he says...

These stories he tells are so simple and yet... and yet if we did open our hearts and homes to those on the margins of society what might happen? This Jesus seems to turn upside down everything that I hold dear – respectability, honour and comfort. He never accuses me directly and yet as I find myself thinking 'this is for so and so,' I find it is really for me.

I went home challenged by what I'd heard. I met my good friends Joanna and Susanna over lunch and we talked about what it might mean to take seriously what Jesus has said. Quietly and privately I released some capital and sent it to support his work.

Now I begin to explore what it might mean for me to become a friend of sinners...