

Sermon – Luke 14.1, 7-14, Hebrews 13.1-8, 15-16

Let mutual love continue.

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.

These first two verses from the Letter to the Hebrews jumped out at me the other night as I started to pull together this first sermon on our Vision. Last week the Liturgy team met to discuss the preaching and music roster for September and I floated the idea of doing a series on our Vision – Welcoming, God Centred, Thriving. And as we looked at the readings, it seemed that the best week to start would actually be this last week of August where, not one but two of the readings look at the meaning of hospitality. So today I want to explore with you the meaning of hospitality, the meaning of Welcoming, as Jesus saw it in our Gospel reading, and what that means for us today, as a small community in Lara and Little River. And I need to warn you, that this sermon will be interactive, so perhaps start thinking now about what it means to be Welcoming here because I will be asking the question later and expecting to have a conversation.

But before we get into the Gospel reading, I just want to make a concluding remark on the Letter to the Hebrews which we started looking at 4 weeks ago when we talked about Faith. As I mentioned back then, this letter is primarily about the identity of Jesus and in the last chapters, and chapter 13 is the last chapter, the writer moves onto words of encouragement. And it's another beautiful start to a chapter isn't it? "Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers". By putting these two concepts together, it seems to me that the writer is saying that one of the expressions of love is hospitality. And we know that Jesus was big on love. He said love your God, love your neighbour, he even said love your enemy.

So I think this means that we are to live with radical hospitality, and that leads us to our Gospel reading today.

Well, my preferred commentary on Luke's Gospel is Brendan Byrne's *The Hospitality of God*. He sees this Gospel as a Gospel focused on radical reversal as famously articulated by Mary's Song in the very first chapter where she says "My soul magnifies the Lord" and then goes on to say "he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." And this theme continues throughout the Gospel in Jesus' sermon on the plain about blessings and woes, and into chapter 14 where our reading today is found. And the setting for our reading today is a meal. Many of the scenes and parables in Luke's Gospel can be found using the hospitality motif. Indeed, Jesus himself came as a divine guest to the world that rejected him, but ultimately he became the host who offers such a hospitality in which this same world can know salvation in the depths of their hearts. So let's see what Jesus says about Welcoming in Chapter 14.

Well, this chapter is part of Jesus' journey back to Jerusalem and is full of teachings as Jesus equips his disciples for their own journeys post resurrection. And the message today comes in two parts. Jesus has been invited to dinner on the Sabbath by one of the religious leaders of the Pharisees. Now this would have been a formal occasion and from the culture of the day, it was most likely men only, who sat or reclined around table based on the local social hierarchy. So into this fairly normal situation, Jesus tells a parable and we know as soon as that word "parable" comes up, that there is a message here, and a message that is not necessarily obvious. So Jesus talks about this practice of social hierarchy and seating for formal occasions. He makes the comment that it is better to sit lower

and receive promotion than sit higher and be demoted. And after introducing this practical advice, which makes a lot of sense in a middle eastern culture focused on honour and shame, Jesus says “For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” Aha! He’s slipped in one of his favourite themes, the theme of radical reversal. So what banquet is he talking about? The eternal banquet, the heavenly feast, to which we are all invited.

The message becomes clear, especially in light of the next few verses, when he turns around and addresses his host. “But 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.’

Jesus is calling us all to exercise radical hospitality, just like the hospitality that God offers us. God welcomes us into the kingdom, welcomes us to that heavenly feast, regardless of our social status, our wealth or achievements, or any of those earthly performance measures that we are all so addicted to. But do we accept or even recognize that invitation? And how do we ourselves, either individually or as a community, take up the challenge of radical welcoming? How do we welcome the poor, the lame and the blind to our banquets?

So perhaps it’s a good time now to pause and consider these questions and have a conversation.

What does Welcoming mean to us?

How do we individually welcome people into our community?

What does radical welcoming mean to us?

How do we as a community, take up the challenge of radical welcoming?

How can we step outside our comfort zone, and this is what Jesus asks of us, to welcome others into our community?

Next week, we will look at the second theme in our Vision - God Centred. Perhaps the questions to ask will be how do I make God the centre of my life, my world, my church? I look forward to hearing what you have to say! Let us pray.

Loving God, we give you thanks that you offer us a radical welcome to your eternal banquet. Equip us and strengthen us to do the same here in Lara and Little River. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.