

**TRINITY 11 2025**  
**Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16; Luke 14:1, 7-14**  
**The Dean's Sermon**

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

Wise instruction from the anonymous Letter to the Hebrews.

A few years ago, I preached on this theme, drawing on the story of Abraham showing hospitality to three men who were passing by his tent near the oaks at Mamre, only to realise that he had entertained none less than the living God.

Early that same Sunday evening, the doorbell rang at The Deanery (Minster House) - standing there were three young men. My mind immediately went back to my sermon of that morning. They were Dutch students, beginning a cycling holiday in England and Scotland. They had just cycled from the Hull ferry, and in their attempts to find somewhere to camp for the night, came to Ripon. A helpful Riponian had directed them to the Dean and his wife. After my sermon, how could we refuse to help? In fact, we also shared our dinner with them – my wife insisted! And she was right to do so, our evening was enriched as a result. And it saved my wife from another evening of my conversation!

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

Well, like Abraham, the leader of the Pharisees of whom we hear in this morning's gospel found Himself showing hospitality to God. This shows the power of dining and partying together – it strengthens friendships and bonds and even overcomes differences and misunderstandings.

Here at Ripon Cathedral, we celebrate our early Benedictine influence. Thanks to the initiative of our founding saint, Wilfrid, this was the first place in these islands where the Benedictine rule was lived out in community. And we take seriously Benedict's charge to show hospitality. 'All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ, who said 'I was a stranger, and you welcomed me'. One commentator points out that the Rule is building on the earlier wisdom of the Rabbis who wrote, 'Hospitality is one form of worship'.

Returning to our gospel passage, we do have to admire this elevated Pharisee who showed hospitality. How often was Jesus scathing in his criticism of him and his colleagues? 'Woe to you scribes and

Pharisees, hypocrites!’ Jesus said repeatedly according to St. Matthew. And yet here, according to St. Luke, a Pharisee invited him into his home and offered him dinner.

I guess we all enjoy eating and drinking, even partying, with friends and family. The more introverted amongst us perhaps prefer smaller, more intimate gatherings. The extroverts love to have a sense of occasion and large numbers to circulate around – catching up with old friends, getting to know new ones. Little wonder that Jesus likened heaven to a great banquet. Little wonder he charged his followers to come together to share a meal, to feast together on the bread of heaven – uniting us with him and each other in a heaven-focussed, kingdom-shaped community.

And how encouraging it is then that more people in our country seem to be responding to the invitation to gather with us in this feasting – including more young people. The Church of England’s Cathedral Statistics for 2024 have just been published. They reveal that across all our cathedrals as a whole, there was an 11% increase in Sunday attendances over the year. With mid-week attendances, there was an increase of 15% amongst adults and 16% amongst children and young people. Christmas attendances were about the same as the previous year, perhaps because buildings like Ripon Cathedral are reaching capacity. At Easter there was a 12 % increase.

Now, all of this is really encouraging if we who are drawn to worship are genuinely looking for a taste of heaven, a share in the heavenly banquet in the midst of this life – so that, by God’s grace, the world might become a bit more like heaven than otherwise it would be. Remember, that is what we are about here this morning in the celebration of the Eucharist– and every day at the cathedral – with the Church all around the world.

It’s helpful then, that today’s readings give some helpful reminders about what the culture and ethics of these heavenly gatherings, this community, must be.

Jesus knew that he was being scrutinised when he entered the Pharisee’s house. Those who live in the public eye will be aware of what this can feel like. But Jesus is bold, and he chooses to use the opportunity to give a lesson in humility. When invited to a banquet, don’t presume to take the place of honour. Much better to be affirmed with a call to come up higher than to be humbled by a charge to take a more lowly seat.

Humility then is important. ‘Those who humble themselves will be exalted.’

Tom Wright, when commenting on this passage, points out that Jesus isn’t really bothered here by dinner party etiquette when chatting over supper with the Pharisee and his guests. There is a clear message here for the Israel of his day. Do not presume to think you are superior in the Kingdom of God and that your

place is assured and elevated. There will be plenty of others invited into the Messianic banquet, perhaps some of those who have been excluded will be sitting at the top table.

Which brings us to the later part of this morning's gospel reading. Jesus also said to the one who had invited him, 'When you give a luncheon or dinner do not invite your friends... (and so forth) but invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind.'

Jesus is saying that the heavenly party, or community, is to be more open and inclusive, more welcoming of those who have been excluded. And here the message becomes uncomfortable for us, perhaps.

The Letter to the Hebrews rightly says, 'Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and today and for ever.' And so he is, his challenge to Israel stands as the challenge to the Church, to any society that would wish to be as good as it possibly can be, and certainly to a society which has been shaped and strengthened by the Christian faith. Bijan Omrani demonstrates clearly that our society has been so influenced in his book *God is an English Man*. So, this charge of Jesus challenges us now.

So, two brief final thoughts. We are to be humble – in our approach to the life of the heavenly banquet – to kingdom living. The humble are to be exalted. There are those who will be invited to the top table of community life. For some of us, this might be utterly alarming. Benedict in his Rule talks of Jacob's Ladder, suggesting we descend by exaltation and ascend by humility. But the call to humility is not an invitation to hide our lights under bushel baskets and to be deaf to Christ's calling of us. Christ sometimes calls us to take responsibility and to step up.

Finally, we are to be open to the inclusion of all. St. Paul put it so well in his Letter to the Galatians. 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus'.

Jesus, this morning, speaks of being welcoming to those on the margins, the fringes of society – people normally excluded. But inclusion is not beyond limits, it presumes a willingness, humbly to be shaped by Christ who is the same yesterday, today and for ever. This Messianic banquet, this heavenly community, operates by Kingdom ethics.

We remember that Christ is our generous host, and the quality of our life together gets better the more Christlike we become.