

Eating with Jesus

Sermon Luke 14:1, 7-14

St Andrews Church Cairo, 31 August 2007

Late 1980s when I lived in Egypt; a problem for me, spoiled young man from wealthy Holland, was that not much food was available in the market. Sugar and chicken were rationed, as well as many other sorts of food. You need coupons to buy those goods in the government shops, the gamaeiaat.

That is very different now: if you have money, you can buy all food you like.

I am very jealous of people who can eat and drink as much as they like, and it does not influence their size. I love eating and drinking and feasting with people, but sadly it DOES impact badly on the circumference of my gastronomical parts. So I must always be careful...

Don't you love good food and dinners with your family and best friends?

Eating with other people has throughout history been one of the major manners in which families and friends had communion with each other. Eating together is one of the best ways of having true fellowship. No wonder the church also symbolizes the fellowship and communion of the believers around the symbols of a meal. Bread and wine.

In the Bible, we often read of Jesus eating with people, and He often used those times of joy and relaxation for teaching about the Kingdom of God.

We have read just now an interesting description by Luke of a diner Jesus was this time invited to. Luke was not an eyewitness to that diner – he was not there - but his gospel is a very credible historical description of what happened.

Luke was a scientist, a medical doctor actually, and he wrote this gospel as a careful historian. Listen to how he wrote his gospel:

Read from Bible Luke 1:1-3

In Luke 14, Luke writes,

Jesus was invited to a dinner party by a leader among the Pharisees, some prominent Pharisee. That man belonged to that rigidly legalistic group of theologians. Jesus' behavior at this meal was particularly interesting because he was harshly rebuking both the host who invited him, and also the guests.

That was not what we would consider polite – but it was not a time for politeness.

At this particular dinner party, Jesus was NOT invited because the religious leaders of Israel enjoyed his company, but He was invited in order for them to find fault in him. Luke says that Jesus was being carefully watched.

Just imagine that you are at a party, and everyone is looking your way the whole time,

whether you make mistakes.
Whether you behave well.
Whether you use knife and fork well,
whether you talk nicely.
You will feel a total outsider and rejected. That is NOT a dinner party for true heartfelt fellowship – it is plainly awful.

We did not read the whole story; the first thing that happened during that diner party on the Sabbath day, was that Jesus healed a sick person, just as he did on one of the previous Sabbaths. Jesus did it again - he healed a man – on the Sabbath, even though the Pharisees considered that haraam – taboo.

The atmosphere must have been electric and very difficult for Jesus. He knew many hated him, and that he was only there because his enemies wanted to trick him into deeds for which he could be punished by civic, Roman, law.

His enemies were doing their utmost to find reasons to get him out of the way. Jesus was in the last period of his life – he would only have some more months to live. In this tense atmosphere he taught his host and the guests some important lessons – lessons that are also of great importance to us.

1. Let us go to listen to lesson one

Jesus' first comment was regarding how the guests had picked their places at the diner table. They chose the most honorable places.

Of course if you are a guest at a diner party it is not advisable to be openly critical of the behavior of the other guests, but Jesus wanted to teach these people an important principle in the kingdom of God.

In the time of Jesus, people would be seated on couches that were made for three people. In you had, for instance, 21 guests, you needed 7 of those couches.

Those 7 couches would then be arranged in such a manner that a U shape was created. The central place was in the curve of the U, where the host would be seated. The next most honorable places would be left and right of him. The least honorable places would be the seats farthest away.

What did the guests at the party do? As soon as the time for being seated had come, they scrambled to get the best seats, closest to the host – because he was an important man.

How embarrassing. If you have ever been involved in organizing a diner party, for instance at a wedding, than you know how complicated it is to arrange all people well.

We honor people by having them at the table of the host, and we can spend much time deciding who sits exactly opposite to the host, left and right. You cannot put people together at one table if they are not on speaking terms. Table-seatings... that can be a tremendous headache ...

But the guests at this party where Jesus was, did not care a bit and they scrambled for the best, honorable, places. The host, this leading Pharisee, must actually have felt quite upset about their rude behavior.

Jesus tells a parable that makes clear how rude and wrong the attitude of these people was. He tells of a wedding where people seat themselves at places that are meant for guests of honor, and so the leader of the feast goes to them and tells them to take another, less honorable seat. I guess many of us have, at one time or another, been in such a situation and it is very embarrassing. Ofcourse the other guests notice that you are put down but the leader, you lose face, and you have to swallow hard.

It is much better, Jesus says, to take a more humble seat, and then be invited by the host: come please, and sit at my table!

The people at the party with Jesus were probably mostly other Pharisees, and it is very surprising that these religious people had to be taught this lesson by Jesus. They all knew the wise advice of Proverbs 25:6-7

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 the prince.

The key statement of Jesus is verse 11. He explains why their behavior is so appalling in the eyes of God:

For all who exalt themselves will be humbled,
and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

That is his criticism of those Pharisees trying to get the best places, and thinking of themselves only.

People who exalt themselves usually do that at the expense of others – like in the diner party Jesus attended. ‘I want the better seat, let the other guys sit at the lower seats. I am entitled to good treatment. I have my rights. I am important. I do not allow others to walk all over me...’ Is this not an attitude that we all know too well, for instance in the workplace?

The issue is not just that they are rude at a diner party, the true problem is spiritual – the problem of pride and of exalting oneself. In the kingdom of God, those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

With his comments, Jesus takes the behavior at the diner, a temporary issue, to the height of eternal matters: He gives us a precious Kingdom rule: God rewards humility and a servant attitude – maybe not in this life, but certainly in the life to come. Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth...

Humility and serving others is not that you allow others to walk over you, and it is also not the same as feeling that you are a worm. It is not feeling bad about yourself, or having a low opinion of yourself, or thinking of yourself as inferior to others.

A humble person makes a realistic assessment of himself without illusion or pretense to be something he is not. He regards himself neither smaller nor larger than he truly is. He does not mind to help other people, as he does not have his own interests in front of him.

Humility frees us to be ourselves and to focus on the well-being of others, to love them and to serve them selflessly, for their sake, rather than for our own benefit.

This attitude of humble servanthood liberates us from being preoccupied with ourselves and our goals all day. We do not have to wear a mask or put on a facade in order to look good to others.

The leader of the dinner party, the Pharisee, was not a particular friend of Jesus – even an enemy – but I can imagine that he must have felt funny about these statements of Jesus. Because his guests HAD indeed behaved rudely, and yes, they could certainly use a modicum of humility...

2. second lesson

But then came the second important lesson from Jesus, now directed at the host of the party. Jesus also criticizes him: He criticizes him for the types of guests he had invited.

Jesus said:

"When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.

What did Jesus tell the man?

Do not only organize parties for your friends who may invite you in return. Think also of the poor, the paupers, the lame, the crippled. People who do not have money to throw parties and eat well, and who can not invite you back,

Jesus is criticizing the host, that he created a guest-list of people from whom he could expect favors in return. He did something good for the people, because he assumed his goodness would get compensation from those same people.

The host thought that his guests for rude for only thinking about themselves and not about others – but Jesus tells the man that his own attitude is exactly the same. He only thought of his own interest – that was the basis of his guest list.

And why – says Jesus – should we invite those who cannot invite us back? What did he say to the Pharisee?

because they cannot repay you; and exactly therefore, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.

If you get your reward next week, because the people that eat with you invite you next week, then you will not be rewarded in eternity. What Jesus points to is the issue of motivation.

If you do things to work yourself upwards and to get things in return, you do it not for the sake of the good thing itself, but because of your own desire, for your own sake, for your own benefit.

Selflessness is utterly important in the Kingdom of God; doing things for the sake of others, without expecting payback.

So Jesus tells the leader of the party, to next time invite the poor, the cripple, the lame, the blind. That will show that you have a motivation to humbly serve others.

And those were the people Jesus had come for.

Sure, Jesus' mission was that the whole world, all people, would believe in Him and be made followers of Him. But often He made clear that His Gospel was in the first place for the joy and liberation of those people who are oppressed in this world.

He has come for the needy people, not for those who think they can fight and elbow their way through life, and who are in a position to organize sweet parties for their nearest friends and family in order to reap the benefits themselves.

So the whole party was severely criticized by Jesus: the guests for only thinking of themselves, by elbowing to the best seats

...and the leader for only thinking of himself and making sure that he would get something in return for the invitation of the people to the diner.

Jesus came to save the lost... and the Jewish leaders at that party were only thinking of their own interests. As we also often tend to do. How many of our sentences do not begin with 'I'.

Jesus himself:

Jesus himself was the prime example of true humility and servanthood. Voluntarily he became the servant of mankind. The apostle Paul expresses this most beautifully in his letter to the Philippians, chapter 2: 5-1. These verses were probably a song of the early church:

Let us read that now. Listen well:

Philippians, chapter 2: 5-11

Jesus was in his very nature God,
but took the nature of a servant
humbled himself
Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place

Paul says that our attitude should be similar,
exactly in accordance with what Jesus was teaching at the diner party.

A few months after this diner party, Jesus died on the cross, as the servant of us all. He gave His life to invite us to communion around the table in church. He gives us freely, we have nothing to give back, except becoming his followers.

God loved us first, and our love is a response of gratitude to his great mercy and kindness towards us. For us to follow his example and humbly, lovingly serve those around us, is our sacrifice for Him.

Servanthood and loving generosity for all people, demand a measure of Christ-like self-sacrifice. That may be costly, sometimes painful, but it doesn't impoverish, but rather enriches the soul of the giver.

Jesus makes clear that in the Kingdom of God, actions based on the desire to serve oneself, and to promote oneself in life, are not the actions that await rewards from God. They mean nothing in Gods Kingdom. What is valuable in His eyes, is our humble servanthood that looks for the good of others.

Let us pray

"Lord Jesus, you became a servant for my sake to set me free from the tyranny of selfishness. Help me to be humble as you are humble and to love freely and graciously all whom you call me to serve."

"Lord, fill me with gratitude for your unboundless love and mercy towards me. And purify my love for others that I may seek their good rather than my own benefit or gain. Free me to lovingly serve others as you loved me first."