

A few years ago, when I was a member of a Commonwealth Government panel, I found that, when on government business, not only was I entitled to business class travel, but that the government insisted on it. I made a feeble sort of protest about this but then found that I adapted quite quickly to my new found status. I would breeze through priority check in and security, past all the plebs who, in long lines, were shuffling slowly forward. Then I'd stroll casually into the business class lounge and relax while waiting for my flight. And then, of course, there were proper meals and good wines in flight. This was all very well, but I began to notice in myself a tendency to assume that all this was something I deserved, and to enjoy a bit too much the privilege and deference being given to me. The truth is that, in my hankering after status and privilege, I wasn't so different to the Pharisees in the Gospel passage set for today. But here's a thing, I'm fairly sure that I'm not alone in this, and that many of you also share, to some extent, that same desire for privilege and status. In this regard and in other ways, I think that, as we look at the Pharisees in our Gospel reading, we might find mirrored there a glimpse of ourselves.

The setting for our passage is a sabbath meal to which a leader of the Pharisees has invited a number of his friends, together with a special guest, the provocative young prophet, Jesus of Nazareth. St Luke tells us that the guests were watching Jesus closely. Maybe there's a hint of threat in that statement, but in an ironical twist the host and his friends soon find that they are the ones under examination.

Before the meal begins the assembled guests are confronted by a man with dropsy, or in modern terms, edema – an accumulation of fluid especially in the lower limbs caused by sometimes serious underlying health issues. This man quite possibly had a life-threatening illness, so Jesus puts a question to the guests – among whom we're told, were other Pharisees and experts in the law, "Is it lawful," he asks, "to cure people on the Sabbath or not?" When they remain silent, Jesus takes the man

aside and heals him and then sends him away and then turns back to the group and asks, "If one of you has a child or an ox that has fallen into a well, will you not immediately pull it out on a sabbath day?" By stressing immediate action Jesus may be suggesting there's some urgency about the man's need for healing, but we don't really know, and neither do the Pharisees. Luke simply tells us that they couldn't answer.

It's possible that these well-educated Pharisees and teachers of the law are silenced by a recognition of their own hypocrisy – that Jesus' words brought home to them that, if there was a threat to a member of their family or their livelihood, they probably would act on the sabbath but that they would be inclined to uphold the letter of the law when it came to helping an outsider. That's quite possible, but I think the Pharisees also recognise that Jesus is also putting a bigger question to them – and that's a question about their priorities.

I did a study tour of Israel in the mid 1990's and, as part of that, a group of us met in Jerusalem with a young but quite brilliant Jewish rabbi. I remember him saying at one point that Israel would be saved by keeping the sabbath. He wasn't talking about the nation state of Israel but about the Jewish people. Preserving the sabbath, keeping it holy, protecting it, honouring it, so that it provided for rest, and family time and building relationships, he explained, was the key to saving the spiritual life of individuals and families, and the social cohesion of the community. The concern of the Pharisees to preserve the sabbath has the same roots – they wanted to keep the sabbath holy, as decreed in the 10 commandments, in order to preserve the way of life of Israel. Often, we see the Pharisees as villains but in their own eyes, in defending the sabbath, they were defending the life of the nation. The problem was that, over the years, many of the guidelines they devised to guard the sabbath came to be regarded as law rather than simply a useful tradition and so, by the time of

Jesus, the legalistic application of many of these traditions made them counter-productive.

In our passage today, the well-intentioned concern of the Pharisees to protect the sabbath threatens to get in the way of the healing mission of God - and Jesus calls it out. He calls them to think through their priorities. Which is more important, he's asking, to observe their traditions about what can or can't be done on the sabbath, or to pursue God's mission to provide healing and hope?

It's easy for us to be critical of the Pharisees but, as I said in my introduction, sometimes we might catch a glimpse of ourselves mirrored in their attitudes and behaviour. We're meant to learn from the Pharisees, not simply criticise them. Could it be that some of our venerable Anglican traditions are now getting in the way of our mission to offer healing and hope in the name of Jesus? The Pharisees were blind to the ways in which their well-intentioned traditions about the sabbath were getting in the way of God's mission. Do we also have well-intentioned traditions that might be impeding our mission? Are there things about the customary ways in which the Anglican church operates that might be hampering the mission of God? Are there things that we do, here at St Lukes, either as habit or custom or tradition, that might be getting in the way of God's mission. Perhaps Jesus is calling us to think through our priorities as he did with the Pharisees?

Well, this lunch party is not going as planned, and it doesn't improve much from hereon. As guests begin to select their seats Jesus, somewhat wryly I suspect, notices their competition for the places of honour and tells a short parable about humility. In the Greek and Roman culture which surrounded Israel at the time status was something you had compete for and grasp, and if you climbed up the social order it was by your own efforts, and, therefore, if you achieved high status, it fed your ego, and you could afford to look down on others (such as those in the

economy line at the airport!) It doesn't take much reflection to realise that this kind of thinking is necessarily destructive of community. Without thinking about it too much the guests at this lunch had absorbed the values and behaviour of the surrounding culture. The parable is designed to provoke some critical thinking by the guests about their behaviour and to pull them back to the values and behaviour that God wants, values and behaviour that would build a Godly community. Once again, I suspect that we are not so very different from the Pharisees - we also are affected by the values of the culture in which we live, and often unthinkingly let them shape our behaviour. The parable reminds us that the status we have as invited guests in God's kingdom is a gift of grace – we don't earn it, we haven't earned it, we can't earn it – we have no reason for pride and every reason for humility. Jesus concludes the parable with a warning that applies as much to us as to the Pharisees: *'All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.'*

The same calling back of God's people from conformity to the surrounding culture to the values of God's kingdom is seen also in the final part of our reading. Just when the host is thinking that things couldn't get much worse, Jesus turns and speaks directly to him.

"When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers and sisters or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. ¹³ But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. ¹⁴ And you will be blessed because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

In Greek and Roman society favours – such as an invitation to dinner – were granted to those whom the host felt were worth inviting. If you were a noble or wealthy person who might provide some future social or economic patronage, you'd get an

invitation. If you were someone the host could help – in return for some kind of future pay-back, you'd get an invitation. What's more, to be invited to such a feast meant that you had been noticed, it would confer a certain recognition, a certain dignity. What you wouldn't do, as a host, is invite people who for one reason or another were deemed to be unworthy – maybe because of their class, or their poverty or their possibly disfiguring illness – and so on. The direction Jesus gives to the host completely contradicts this way of thinking. It would have shocked and possibly also shamed the host who, as a leader of the Pharisees, would have been very aware of God's concern for the poor and disadvantaged which is a constant theme in the Old Testament scriptures. Again, Jesus is calling God's people back to the values God wants and to the kind of community God wants. Again, his direction applies as much, if not more, to Christians in the twenty first century as it did to Pharisees in the first century, because we acknowledge that while we were yet sinners God recognised our human dignity by inviting us to his table as an act of grace through his Son, Jesus Christ, whom we call Lord.

It may not be either wise or helpful these days to give a dinner party for the homeless or those who are ill in one way or another, but we must always remember the dignity which is given to us, the worth that has been affirmed for us, through God's grace - and we must take the opportunities God gives us to extend the same grace and affirm the same worth to those, who for one reason or another, our society would prefer to ignore.

In my time I've been to a few dinner parties that have gone spectacularly wrong – but none of them left guests challenged by disturbing questions about their spiritual lives. God grant us the courage not to evade the questions that come to us this morning as we reflect on what Jesus has to say to us through this teaching