

“Knowing your Place?” 28.8.16

Today’s three readings make an interesting selection. The first from Proverbs (25.6-7) sounds like advice to watch your step in a feudal society where royalty will slap you down if you step out of line. The second, the parable about the wedding feast, (Luke 14.1+7-14) seems to be about good manners when you’re at a big party. And the third, from Hebrews (13.1-8+15-16), is at first sight a typically sound and worthy list of instructions for Christian living for those who have managed to read this far through all the theology which precedes it. Let’s take a closer look: I think you might be surprised at what we find.

If you were following the Proverbs verses in the bible and your eye strayed in the brief time available you might have seen that they come under the heading “Proverbs of Solomon.” And the main thrust of this passage seems to be “Don’t let wicked people contaminate the king’s court, because they will make it harder for him to carry out the righteous rule which is his purpose.” But the overall tenor of the two verses we heard was “Know your place”, and I’m not sure that this meaning has a lot of relevance to the society we live in. So let’s turn it on its head. We all like to be respected, even though we know in our heart of hearts that we may not always really deserve it. Yet respect seems to be waning. People who used to be respected for the position they held no longer are. Some of you may remember that notorious interview of Tony Blair when he was PM by Jeremy Paxman, who rather sneeringly (I thought) tried to get Blair to say whether or not he prayed with George Bush. So here’s a thought, and I’m painting with a very broad brush here: has the collapse of religion in our society contributed to the collapse of respect? If you stop believing that everyone around you is made in God’s image (and do we??) then respect is surely going to suffer. And is the decline in good manners – if there is one – another symptom of the same trend? There’s something to chew over along with Sunday lunch.

Luke This can’t just be about “how to behave at a party”. After all, Jesus wasn’t really into giving advice on etiquette, though it’s still good advice. Look at the context: he’s at a meal with Pharisees and lawyers. Men with training and education who strove to keep themselves right with God. No doubt they succeeded some of the time, and felt proud that they at least were getting it right, and looked for opportunities to criticise or correct others who didn’t do so well: would-be teachers like Jesus, for instance. So on this occasion he was keeping company with well-educated men who were watching him carefully, and ready to trip him up. That’s the first point to remember. Later in the meal, Jesus tells the parable about the man who gave out invitations to a party but when all was ready they made excuses that they couldn’t attend after all, so he sent his servants out to collect anyone they could find to come to the banquet instead.

Secondly, the Jews never found it easy at any time to welcome foreigners in to share God’s grace. After all, weren’t they the chosen race? When Gentiles became Christians in Acts – in the years following the crucifixion – there was considerable opposition to them from Jewish Christians. Why should they receive God’s forgiveness? They hadn’t been born Jews. They

weren't even circumcised! Quite a few passages in Paul's letters are devoted to sorting out this problem. It's all very understandable. You see another aspect of this same problem when the disciples argue over which of them will be most important in the kingdom of God. So if you're a Pharisee – a top dog in the top nation - even other Jews – the beggars, the publicans who'd really in effect gone over to supporting the hated Roman occupiers, the uneducated, who didn't know the law properly anyway... Would people like these really get into the kingdom? Mmm. A few might sneak in through the back door. So the sense of superiority and entitlement must have been pretty overwhelming.

But we're not like that, are we? We're humble, we don't push ourselves forward. In fact, like me, you've probably often thought that humility is one of your best virtues. Oops! Easy, isn't it, to slip into this way of thinking! Aren't we all a bit like that? I know I am. Do we, well enough off, reasonably comfortable, feel pretty secure and safe that we're OK with God? You know – "Don't worry, God, everything's fine down here! I'm in charge on the bridge of the ship of my life. We're doing very nicely, thank you – you needn't worry about us! Just leave us to get on in our own way!" And before we know it, we're thinking that we're justified in the place we've earned at the feast which is the kingdom, earned through our own efforts and good deeds. And slowly but surely grace, mercy and forgiveness have vanished out of the window.

Jesus continued to meet attitudes like these throughout his ministry, and he kept on preaching, trying to explain, encourage, remind, and it must have been very dispiriting at times. Some of his most vehement criticisms were of Pharisees – "whitewashed tombs" he called them – remember? Shining white on the outside, but stinking and rotten underneath. And he also kept on apparently breaking the "rules": healing on a Sunday, mixing with publicans and sinners and Pharisees – and women! Remember how shocked the disciples were when they found he had been chatting to the woman of Samaria at the well. So what's the equivalent for us, for you and for me? It's probably a little different for each of us, but it's certainly something we should be asking God about in our prayers.... and perhaps the subject of a different sermon!

But you see what I'm getting at: this parable is about not pushing yourself forward in front of others because you think you are better than they are. About not claiming God's bounty for yourself and denying it to others. It is about showing the open-hearted, generous love of God for everyone, rather than a mean, selfish love only for those like ourselves. And the question remains: how does this translate for us here in Stowe?

Hebrews The Heb passage looks at first like a conventional list of do's and don'ts, but it's really much more than that. These are all basic practical rules for creating a cohesive, properly functioning and caring society. But they go a little further than we might expect, and further than contemporary culture might insist on. There's a sermon in every verse – but don't worry! Here are some thoughts, and I'll major on one or two in particular.

Verse 1 is our own motto (Loving God, Loving our Neighbours) Loving our neighbours isn't always easy, but the more we love God, the easier it becomes to love our neighbours. Verse 2

– showing hospitality to strangers was perhaps more important in days when there were very few if any hotels as we know them. The reference to some entertaining angels unawares is to Abraham, who actually had a visit from the Lord when he was told that Sarah would have a child. But we should also think of Jesus' words in Matthew (25.35) in the last bit of teaching that Matthew reports before the last supper. Jesus paints a dramatic picture of the final judgement (31ff). "Son of man comes in his glory...all the angels...glorious throne...all the nations...sheep and goats..." What does the King say? He takes the sheep apart and says to them: "I was hungry and you gave me food...I was naked and you clothed me...I was in prison and you came to me." It's a very salutary reminder.

And verse 3 continues the theme: "remember those who are in prison." With our global communications network, we know far more than our ancestors ever knew – and much more quickly - about what's happening all over the world, and one striking fact is that many more Christians are suffering than I, for one, ever imagined. Do we pray regularly for them? I know I don't. One of the verses we should always remember is James 5.16: "The prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects" I believe we have a duty to pray for our brothers and sisters who are suffering persecution. May I suggest one way of doing this, as Peter Farquhar used to do? Try using the material from Open Doors – readily available online, by email, or through the post. They have prayer diaries with imaginative, intelligent, specific prayers for each day. It only takes a few minutes. [Hold up a copy] And more general prayers which you find you remember after using them a few times. Strongly recommended.

The next two suggestions are becoming more and more counter-cultural even as I speak: honouring marriage, and avoiding the love of money. Greed for possessions is now regarded as perfectly respectable, dressed up as "consumerism", which we're told is essential if the good ship of capitalism is to be kept afloat. Jesus did say that it was very hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Are we in danger here? We're certainly rich in comparison with much (most?) of the rest of the world. And you can see how focussing on the accumulation of wealth can push out other considerations. So I see these verses from Hebrews as being like the annual service we give our cars – a check-up that everything is running smoothly – a reminder of where adjustments need to be made in our attitudes and behaviour. Finally verse 7: I'm sure many of us can look to someone or several people who inspired us or taught us our faith. People we felt we were fortunate to have known. It is good from time to time to consider how we are shaping up in relation to the lives we saw them lead. Amen.