

Worship for Sunday 28th August 2022

Call to worship

To celebrate faith, give thanks for family, and delight in friendship...

To entertain new opportunities, take comfort from old certainties, and to contemplate endless possibilities...

To speak and sing our words, to hear God's word and to listen to others,

and, most of all, simply to wait in the quietness and know that God is near,

we have come to this place, to the house of God, in the company of God's people, to discover God's will.

With all that in mind, let us worship God.

Hymn 14: The Lord's my shepherd, I'll not want

Prayer

Shepherd God, companion, protector and guide, we praise you. Without you, we would wander into difficult places, stray on to dangerous ground, and come to harm. But with you, we are assured, wherever we find ourselves, you are near, somehow in front to lead and behind to encourage, and on all sides, that we might not doubt your nearness. In confidence, then, with hope and expectation, we come to you, the one who gathers and holds us, and to whom we offer adoration and thanksgiving for all that you are: leader, enabler and comforter.

Despite all that you are, we, merciful God, remain determined to go our own way, do our own thing, insist that our limited knowledge and doubtful wisdom are all sufficient. But we have been proved wrong: he have strayed into places where mistakes came easily, self will pushed you aside, and our once sure-footed progress ground to a halt. We have been dismayed, and toyed with disaster, and now have no alternative: we must confess that we have not been that we'd hoped to be, and, in the name of Jesus who called himself "the Good Shepherd", we seek your mercy, healing and restoration.

And now we are assured that you, whom we know so well from the psalm writer's words, grant us forgiveness. Our shortcomings are not held against us, and we are sure to make the same mistakes again, but we will keep on turning to you, looking, searching and, finding you, rest content. You will lead us again by still waters, and in front of us spread a table of plenty, so we need have no fear, and only worship you, you who are the one beyond compare.

Amen.

Reading: Luke 14 verse 1, 7 – 14

Hymn 601: Look upon us, blessed Lord

Sermon

Luke 14 verse 10: But when you are invited, take the lowest place....

Recently I had a meal out in the Lorne Hotel in Dunoon – I recommend it highly – and watched the family at the next table in rapt fascination. Mum, dad, and two teenage boys all enjoyed fish and chips. The meal was served, unsurprisingly, not in white paper, or even newsprint, but on a plate, but the boys simply tore in, ignoring knife and fork completely. It got me thinking about table etiquette. Napkins always had to be used in the Goldie household in which I grew up. There was no watching the telly; thankfully, mobile phones had not been invented. I always had to ask, “Please may I leave the table”, and was not allowed to drown *my* fish supper in tomato sauce. When guests came, they had to be served first, naturally, and one was not allowed to “dig in” until it was obvious others had had sufficient. It did me no harm.....

If I’d not got mixed up with my dates, I’d have been going next month to a very grand dinner indeed, arranged to celebrate the centenary of Jordanhill School, whose fiftieth jubilee I recall marking with an outing to Millport, for which the wearing of uniform was compulsory. (Yes, I know: sad). It’s to be held in Kelvingrove. To cover my disappointment when I realised I’d actually be out of Glasgow at the time, I told myself I might have ended up next to a complete stranger with whom a shared association with the school was the only thing we had in common. No doubt there will be a top table and the great and the good will be seated at it.

Ministers are sometimes given special seats: at ceremonies, at anniversary or special services, and at wedding receptions. Some of the seats I’ve been given at the latter have left me with a lifelong aversion to attending them. Sometimes – usually – it’s at the end of a long table, beside the bride’s father, nervously awaiting the moment when he has to get to his feet in front of a sometimes very mixed company, some of whom may have already downed more alcohol than wise. So there is an hour or more of making polite conversation with an almost total stranger as I count down the moments until the time I can escape without drawing attention to myself. Then there may be the speech itself, sexist remarks usually guaranteed, if not some that are downright crude. But on occasions they are a joy. My prize for the very best father-of-

the-bride speech goes to.... Hamish Marshall, our treasurer, on the day of his and Joyce's daughter, Louise's, wedding.

Today, Jesus is a guest at the home of a man described as **a prominent Pharisee**. It doesn't sound an especially comfortable evening. Luke tells us **he was being carefully watched**. We know, from last Sunday's story of the woman with the bent back, that he had attracted the wrong kind of attention by healing her on the Sabbath in the synagogue. The story ended with these words: **all his opponents were humiliated, but the people were delighted with all the wonderful things he was doing**. He is a divisive figure, and those with position and power are starting to feel very threatened. In the verses that the lectionary chooses to omit, it's another Sabbath and he's at it again. This time it's a man suffering from **abnormal swelling**, who was a fellow guest, apparently. After a question to the Pharisees, who met it with complete silence, we read: **taking hold of the man, he healed him and sent him on his way**. Then Jesus poses another question, and this time, too, the silence is deafening.

And then Jesus has a look around the room and starts on a parable. The setting is that thing I've come mostly to dread: a wedding feast. When we go to a wedding, of course (and some of you have been at one very recently), we don't get to pick our seats. That's done in advance by those paying for it! But, just like our weddings, it seems some seats are more important than others, and Jesus' story is a warning against choosing yourself one of the better ones.

We don't normally go into a place though, do we, and select a poor seat? When booking a theatre ticket, we want the best we can afford, not one stuck behind a pillar, with a "restricted view". On a long bus or train journey, a window seat is nice. And in church, we want one where we can see – and hear – the minister, right? (Or maybe one where, should we fall asleep, we might not be noticed). Or perhaps one away from distractions, the serial chatterers, or folk we'd prefer to avoid. When I attend worship but am not actually responsible for it, I like to be where I can see and hear. But Jesus says, at least in the wedding context, **take the lowest place....**

Last week, I attended two meetings in Dalmuir Barclay Church. There were only five at the first one, and we sat companionably round one table. But in the evening there were about twenty of us, and there was a "top table" of sorts, for the presbytery folk

and the ministers and interim moderators. Somehow, the presbytery folk and the person chairing the meeting sat apart, which was right, for purposes of seeing and hearing. But the rest of us, except for me, sat with the folk from our own churches. What do you do when you come to a church event: Guild... Kirk Session... afternoon tea? Most of us choose the comfortable seats, with like-minded folk. I was really grieved recently to hear, second hand, that one of our members was reluctant to go through after the service for a cup of tea, as that person's experience was of being left sitting alone. If you're going through for tea today, think about that, please. Choosing the seat in which you're comfortable might leave someone else feeling quite the opposite.

Looking for a "lowest place" in honour of, and faithfulness to, Jesus' instruction? Here are some possibilities for you. What about a bedside seat in the Langlands Unit at the Queen Elizabeth University Hospital? Several of our members have spent some time there recently but it seems I was the only church visitor. We have members in eight care homes now and two of them are visited with eye watering regularity by three or four people present in church this morning, whom I might name but won't. Thank you for taking the **lowest place**. I'm not sure how often the others are visited, though, or those of our number suffering dementia in the community. Sitting listening to someone who is repetitive, confused and downright frail, who might not even be sure who you are and how you fit into their life, is never ever going to be anything other than a very low place, mentally and emotionally at least. Or, if you don't want to travel far, or anywhere, just look out for a buddy sitting along in church, and go and sit beside them – oh, and yes, not just for a couple of minutes, maybe for the whole three quarters of an hour that the service lasts.

But here's another thing: Jesus talks about choosing the lowest place, for sure. But that implies an intention to sit, and some of us find that quite hard to do. So, if sitting itself comes only uncomfortably to you, try it. Sit in quiet stillness and you may discover the peace and nearness of God in an altogether new way.

Jesus is talking about sitting of course, sitting in the lowest place, which means just sitting. But this is a wedding feast he's talking about, and where there's a wedding feast, there's a table. In a couple of weeks we will, metaphorically, at least, sit round this one: not for a wedding, a chat, or after service coffee, but for the most important meal we'll ever eat. We'll recall that last meal of Jesus' earthly life, the company of

friends, the presence of the wayward one, the symbolism of the bread and wine, and remember: though Jesus sat at many a table – with family, friends, disciples, the sisters Martha and Mary, the suddenly reformed tax collector, and today, in the home of a prominent Pharisee, all the while being carefully watched – no table, no matter uncomfortable, could have cut into his bones the way this one did. The Last Supper table was a table of holy feasting in honour of the Passover, but it was also a table of holy sacrifice and of unholy betrayal. Love mixed in with dismay, hope made friends with despair, and his friends proved frail and failed just when he needed them most....

..... and then he said something. The gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke all tell us that as he took and passed round the wine, he urged them to drink it, saying (Matthew's words): **I tell you I will not drink from this fruit of the vine.... until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom.** And so, at last, the good news! This table is just the foretaste. There is another table, waiting, beyond seeing and knowing and imagining. It is a table the length and breadth of which is beyond comprehension, made of the finest wood, polished, inlaid with the most beautiful, rarest, most expensive jewels, so splendid that to cover it with a cloth would be to spoil it. But if the table is fine, the guests seated round are finer. You will be there and I will be there and all people of faith and all who love the Lord and walk in his ways will be there and there will be seats aplenty and they will be plush and luxurious and splendid.

when you are invited, take the lowest place. Well done, all of you who've ever chosen a seat that was uncomfortable, where your seeing or hearing was restricted, your comfort short-lived, the people around you unfamiliar, challenging, edgy. How good to know that we don't need to sit in such places forever. God is waiting, the host at the greatest feast of all, and one day will say: **Friend, move up to a better place.** That will be some day indeed....

Hymn 198: Let us build a house where love can dwell

Offering

Prayer

Living God, wherever we go, you have already been, and where we are now, you are present. We have heard your word, sung your praise, and we have listened with our hearts as the gospel writer and Jesus spoke. And now we speak, trying to express in our own way our concerns, cares and conundrums.

Eternal God, we know that, even in Jesus' time, people of faith disagreed over how best to live the life to which you call us. Help us to know what you ask of us, and how to live together as a community of your people in uncertain times. May we honour one another's strengths, learn from one another, offer our best gifts, and be able to set the trivial apart for the sake of what matters more.

As Jesus taught us about choosing where we might sit, we pray for those who sit in the most uncomfortable places: the homeless woman, occupying a bench with her bundle of possessions beside her.... the grieving man, on a cemetery bench, mourning the loss of partner, friend, child.... those who keep vigils by bedsides in hospitals or hospices.... And those who sit in the seats of decision making and government. According to their need, bring dignity and hope, consolation and peace, comfort and companionship, wisdom and determination to do justice.

And we pray for the places we sit, and for those who sit near us: at home, at work, in church and in our leisure places. May we bring strength and be strengthened, offer and receive love, do kindness and receive kindness from others.

Amen.

Hymn 680: You are called to tell the story

Benediction

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you and all those whom you love. Now and always.

Amen.